



## **“Nuclear Blackmail of the Russian Federation”**

### **Policy Brief**

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## Nuclear blackmail of Russia as a means of influencing the West

It has always been a typical situation for world politics when states sought to extend their influence on the outside world based on force. The conditions for such activity changed qualitatively when nuclear weapons appeared in the arsenals of some countries. Since that time, nuclear weapons have been used as an instrument of political pressure in geopolitical disputes and considered as a means of ensuring national security. With such weapons, a state that did not even have a strong position in the global political arena acquired additional opportunities through "nuclear blackmail" to achieve its own interests, without particularly considering the interests of other participants in international relations.

Being primarily a potential threat, nuclear weapons, if used, pose a great danger to all mankind. This is the most powerful weapon mankind has ever had.

From the very beginning of the full-scale invasion of Ukraine, President Putin has used nuclear rhetoric to create the impression of his own invincibility and to deter [any reaction from the West](#). Putin understands that [Russia's nuclear status](#) opens almost endless opportunities to raise the stakes in the international arena.

As the war in Ukraine drags on, there are more and more voices about the possibility of the use of nuclear weapons by the Russian Federation in it. Nuclear weapons are a tool that allows Russia to deter possible assistance to the victim of aggression to Ukraine from other states. This extreme tactic has proven highly effective against risk-averse Western leaders, who have deliberately slow-walked the flow of weapons to Ukraine for fear of provoking [a nuclear response](#).

In 2022, five days before the full-scale invasion of Ukraine, Putin conducted exercises of the strategic deterrence forces, where the use of nuclear weapons was practiced. It was a clear signal to the West [what Russia is ready to do](#).

On February 24, the Russian occupiers illegally seized the Chernobyl nuclear power plant and also bombed the Neutron Source research nuclear facility in Kharkiv. In addition to constant threats to use nuclear weapons, Russia violates the rules of peaceful use of atomic energy by seizing Ukrainian [nuclear facilities](#). From March 2022 the Zaporizhzhia Nuclear Power Plant has become the center of an ongoing nuclear safety crisis, described by Ukraine as an act of [nuclear terrorism by Russia](#). For the first time in history, the Russian occupiers have turned [civilian nuclear facilities into military targets](#) and a place to deploy their army.

A few days after the full-scale war began (February 27), President Vladimir Putin complained that "NATO countries are making aggressive statements about our country" and warned that, as a result, Russia's nuclear forces would be moved to "[a special regime of combat duty](#)." While

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warning that anyone who attempted to interfere with the Russian invasion of Ukraine would face consequences on a scale "[you have never seen in your history.](#)"

In March 2023, Russian media reported that the Russian Federation and Belarus had agreed that [tactical nuclear weapons](#) would be deployed on the territory of the latter. Putin said that it was triggered by a U.K. [decision](#) to provide Ukraine with armor-piercing rounds containing depleted uranium.

It is the first time since the end of the Cold War that Russian nuclear devices have been based outside its territory. Russia will [retain control](#) over the weapons. Putin asserted that the move mirrors the long-standing U.S. [practice of basing tactical nuclear weapons](#) on the territory of NATO allies, including Germany, the Netherlands, Belgium, Italy, and Turkey.

The West is weakening its position, succumbing to Russia's nuclear blackmail, warns Atlantic Council's Eurasia Center expert Olivia Yanchik. Thus, he encourages Putin to act in the same spirit - and this could bring down the entire [established world order](#). The more time passes without a decisive response from Ukraine's partners, the more likely Russia's aggressive [use of nuclear intimidation](#) will become a normalized element of international relations.

If nuclear threats or the actual use of [nuclear weapons](#) leads to the defeat of Ukraine, Russia may use them to coerce other states. If any nuclear state can force others to do anything by citing its nuclear stockpile, then any foreign policy becomes impossible, non-nuclear states will always be forced to give in, and [nuclear states will rule the world](#). Otherwise, every ambitious dictator will scramble to obtain nuclear weapons, and every responsible nonnuclear nation will seek to acquire [nuclear weapons for self-defense](#).

If Putin is allowed to normalize nuclear blackmail as a foreign policy tool, longstanding nonproliferation initiatives will collapse and the world will enter [a dangerous new era of nuclear-armed instability](#). Nonproliferation agreements will be worthless. "If Russian [nuclear blackmail](#) succeeded, non-nuclear states would always be forced to concede" - Timothy Snyder. Tactics once considered immoral and unthinkable might become [commonplace](#).

Nuclear weapons would no longer be regarded solely as a deterrent of last resort; the countries that possess them would gain even greater influence; countries that lack them would seek to obtain them; and [the global risk of devastating wars](#) would increase exponentially. This could plunge the entire world into a new era of [international instability](#) as countries scramble to secure a nuclear deterrent of their own. Countries around the world will change their own [nuclear postures](#) to achieve their expansionist aims or defend themselves against their neighbors.

Russian policy is pushing towards the proliferation of nuclear weapons. Therefore, Ukraine's support reduces the chances of a nuclear war, showing that nuclear blackmail does not work. Historian Timothy Snyder said that "listening to Russia's threats, giving in to its nuclear

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blackmail, means bringing [nuclear war](#) closer.” These words should be heeded and get rid not only of nuclear war, but also of nuclear blackmail.

While the risks of confronting [Russia’s nuclear threats](#) are immediately apparent, the dangers of inaction may actually be far greater. Demonstrative disregard can provoke the Kremlin to further escalation, which may at some point get out of control. The West’s inability to respond decisively is perceived by the Kremlin as a weakness and may encourage [Russian recklessness](#). Conversely, strict adherence to declared Western principles, vigorous actions and the drawing – and most critically the upholding – of "[red lines](#)" can curb the appetites of Russia’s dictator.

The response to Russia’s nuclear blackmail must be fierce and unequivocal, rejecting the very idea of making concessions to a [nuclear aggressor](#). The United States and Ukraine's NATO allies, as well as the most influential countries in Asia, India and China, must clearly warn the Kremlin elite about the inadmissibility of a transition to "[unconventional war](#)" and guarantee a tough, decisive response in case of violation of these agreements.

In September 2022, Putin once again indicated that he was prepared to use nuclear weapons to protect the Russian people and defend the country’s borders. "We will certainly use all the means available to us, and [I’m not bluffing](#)," he warned. This was a particularly menacing threat as it came at a time when Russia was preparing to "annex" four partially occupied Ukrainian provinces, therefore making any attempt to liberate these regions an attack on Russia itself.

In the Telegram channel, Dmitry Medvedev, after holding pseudo-referendums in the temporarily occupied territories, wrote: "the protection of all the annexed territories will be significantly strengthened ... any [Russian weapons](#), including strategic nuclear and weapons based on new principles, can be used for its implementation."

Moscow has not followed through on this threat, even in the wake of the Ukrainian counteroffensive operation that returned the annexed Kherson to Ukraine and pushed [the frontline](#) closer to Crimea.

Ukrainian successes on the battlefield were achieved with the help of conventional weapons that hit military targets, and not with the help of an atomic bomb, the use of which leads to mass casualties among the civilian population.

The United States has demonstrated remarkable resilience to Putin's nuclear threats by warning Putin publicly and privately against using nuclear weapons.

In October 2022, in response to Putin’s speech about "using all means available" to retain the annexed territories, the Biden administration sent strong signals to the Russian leadership that

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any use of [nuclear weapons](#) against Ukraine would be met with an allied US, UK, and French conventional strike on Russia.

The United States contacted Russia and warned about the possible consequences of its use of nuclear weapons. This was announced by US Secretary of State Anthony Blinken. "It is very important that Moscow hears directly from us and learns that the consequences will be horrific," he said in an interview with CBS.

On 4 October, British foreign minister James Cleverly said any Russian use of [nuclear weapons](#) would lead to consequences.

The signals that were sent by Russia concerned exclusively a response by conventional means, but the answer was quite convincing, especially since China was actively involved in it, from which followed a whole series of statements that threats [to use nuclear weapons are unacceptable](#).

The international community must "jointly oppose the use of, or threats to use, nuclear weapons" and "advocate that nuclear weapons cannot be used, a nuclear war cannot be waged, in order to prevent a nuclear crisis" in Europe or Asia, Xi said [on November 4, 2022](#).

Moscow had to expand its margins of acceptable because its badly veiled threat to use nuclear weapons against Ukraine threatened to cross the West's own "red lines". Later that autumn, Putin and then the Ministry of Foreign Affairs ruled out the possibility of Russia carrying out a nuclear attack on Ukraine. This seems to suggest that the United States' deterrent messaging was strong enough to get Russia to back down. Moscow's threats obviously lacked credibility even in the eyes of Putin, who was not ready to risk [escalation with the West](#).

By 2023, the West had discovered that neither increasing the supply of weapons to Ukraine nor Moscow's loss of annexed territories had prompted any serious response from Russia - as if its so-called red lines were shifting or were not actually there at all. Russia has practically stopped being able to scare anyone because all red lines have constantly been successfully moved. As we can see, except for bluffing, fortunately, Russia can no longer do anything like that.

This approach assumes that Russia is just as uninterested in nuclear escalation as NATO and will not risk its own physical destruction. In this regard, Putin can be considered a cautious and rational leader who clearly prefers safe outcomes [to dangerous ones](#).

Although Russia's threats so far have been proven empty, there is still a non-zero chance that Putin might eventually order a nuclear strike if he perceives - mistakenly - that the benefits of doing so outweigh the consequences. That non-zero chance should be reduced still further by a substantial change in how other countries aim to dissuade Russia from considering actual

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[nuclear use](#). It is more prudent to take threats from Russia seriously and analyze how these threats are backed up by military doctrine, capabilities, planning, maneuvers and exercises.

UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres said at a meeting of the signatories of the Treaty on the Non-proliferation of nuclear weapons that the world is one step away from nuclear war. "We've been very lucky so far. But luck is not a strategy. It is also not a defense against geopolitical tensions that escalate into a nuclear conflict," the [UN Secretary General said](#).

Using nuclear weapons on the battlefield will not win the war for Russia in Ukraine, but it will be a huge blow to Russia's status, something [that Russian leaders do care about](#). Therefore, while the Russian Federation hopes for dominance and superpower status, the likelihood of using nuclear weapons is low. For Russia, nuclear weapons are primarily a means of blackmail, and it is not at all a fact that the Kremlin will really take this step, risking a tactical nuclear retaliatory strike or even unleashing an all-out nuclear war. The use of nuclear weapons, first of all, will deprive the Russian Federation of the support of its strongest ally, China.

Russia's constant use of threats of nuclear escalation has undermined their credibility and blunted the coercive effect they initially possessed. Although Russia's nuclear threats suffer from obvious credibility problems, the extreme reluctance of many in the West to test Moscow's resolve means that these tactics have nevertheless been highly effective in restricting or delaying the delivery [of military aid to Ukraine](#). The significant pause that the United States needed in order to still decide to supply modern weapons to Ukraine allowed the Russian military machine to regroup after a period of setbacks and build sufficiently reliable lines of defense of the [occupied territories of Ukraine](#).

The West continues to flagrantly cross all Russia's supposed red lines by delivering arms and holding discussions about ways to support Ukraine. The West has increased its level of arms delivery to Ukraine and included ever-more-sophisticated weapons. Yet it has also been quite careful to keep its distance from Russia's real "red lines". Indeed, the weapons initially supplied to Ukraine were more weapons of survival than weapons of victory. Russian red lines effectively coercing the West not to take steps undesired by Moscow. However, we can also observe a certain shift in U.S. policy here with the Biden administration's September 2023 decision to supply ATACMS to Ukraine. This change points to the declining power [of Russian coercive efforts vis-à-vis the West](#).

However, the nuclear card is never far from the Kremlin's hand. There are some expectations that Russia may escalate the conflict as Ukraine achieves continued strategic victories; the success of the offensive to take Crimea, for instance, might increase Moscow's sense that defeat in the war is inevitable. Also, the more Moscow exhausts its conventional arsenal, the higher the likelihood of a whole spectrum of nuclear responses that have to date been constrained by the United States' quite explicit [deterrent rhetoric](#).

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On 1 November 2023, The Biden administration is preparing to hold a rare discussion with China on nuclear-arms control as the U.S. seeks to head off a destabilizing three-way arms race with Beijing and Moscow. The meeting scheduled for Monday is the first such talks with Beijing since the Obama administration and will focus on ways to reduce the risk of miscalculation, [U.S. officials said](#).

On November 2, 2023, it became known that Putin signed a law on Russia's withdrawal of ratification of [the Comprehensive Nuclear Test Ban treaty](#). In his speech before the Federal Assembly, the Russian president explained his suspension of the New START treaty by reference to the West's pursuit of the "strategic defeat of Russia." The suspension of New START, the withdrawal from the CTBT (which carries with it the possibility of resuming nuclear tests in the future) - all these steps have taken place in the nuclear domain, and one may expect that Russia will go on to make other types of [nuclear threats](#).

In the context of Russian aggression against Ukraine, the nuclear threat has turned from a deterrent into a means of waging an aggressive conventional war: blackmail allows Russia to compensate for its weaknesses and deter Western aid to Ukraine. The lack of a strategic response makes it an effective tool, which means it stimulates its further use in achieving [military and political goals](#).

The rapid return of the topic of nuclear confrontation to relations between Moscow and Washington should serve as a terrible warning about how fragile peace is even between great powers. It cannot be taken for granted, and its maintenance requires relentless efforts. This is one of the main lessons of the quarter century that has passed since the end of [the cold War](#).



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## Cases of nuclear blackmail by the Russian Federation before and after the full-scale invasion of Ukraine

**On 19 February 2022**, on the eve of Russia's invasion of Ukraine, Vladimir Putin, as Commander-in-Chief of the Russian Armed Forces, personally conducted military exercises to test the readiness of the strategic forces to launch [a nuclear response](#). Reporting to Putin on the course of the exercise, Chief of the General Staff Vasily Gerasimov described it as follows: "The exercise is being conducted in two stages. At the first stage, the issue of conducting military operations with the use of weapons of increased potential [danger will be developed](#). And at the second stage, the issue of authorisation and massive use of the strategic offensive forces of the Russian Federation in response to a counter-strike will be addressed." This means that before launching a nuclear strike, Russia is likely to use long-range non-nuclear systems first. This was done just before Russia's invasion in Ukraine, firstly, to make sure that the system was working, and secondly, to demonstrate this capability to its opponents in order to intimidate them. It is also worth noting that **until 19 February 2022**, such large-scale exercises had not been conducted for two years, which once again illustrates the previous thesis that the exercise was another demonstration of Russia's nuclear power to Ukraine and NATO.

In his address on the occasion of the invasion of Ukraine **on 24 February 2022**, Vladimir Putin threatened the Western states, saying:

“Whoever is trying to prevent us [from holding the so-called SMO], and even more so to create threats to our country, to our people, should know that Russia's response will be immediate and will lead you to consequences that you have never faced in your history. [We are ready for any development of events. All necessary decisions have been made in this regard.](#)”

Western experts then concluded that it was the threat of the use of nuclear weapons.

This assumption was confirmed later, **on 27 February 2022**, when Vladimir Putin ordered the Minister of Defence and the Chief of the General Staff to "transfer the deterrence forces of the Russian army to a special mode of [combat duty](#)". The reason for this decision was the threat of Western sanctions, as well as what Putin called "aggressive statements by NATO officials". Most likely, Putin considered aggressive statements to be previous statements by Germany and other European states about accelerated assistance to Ukraine to expel the Russian occupiers from its territory. At the same time, Russian regulations do not provide for any "special mode of combat duty" for strategic nuclear forces, as nuclear forces are part of the country's deterrence forces, and are required to be on constant alert.

**On 27 April 2022**, Vladimir Putin made a new address. It said that Russia has all the tools and will use them with lightning speed if there is an attempt to interfere in what is happening in Ukraine from the outside and create strategic [threats to Russia](#).

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The statement also said that the West had created an unprecedented geopolitical threat to Russia by “turning Ukraine into an anti-Russia”. Putin noted that Russia's reaction in the form of the “SVO”, but in fact a full-scale invasion in Ukraine, was correct and timely, as the West was pushing Ukraine towards a direct clash with Russia and acquiring the status of a nuclear power, contributing to the economic suppression of Russia and providing Ukraine with modern weapons, which created a danger for Russia. In this way, Putin himself is threatening to use nuclear weapons, allegedly because the “Kyiv regime” has aspirations to become a nuclear power.

**On 21 June 2022**, Vladimir Putin announced that "Russia has successfully tested the Sarmat super-heavy intercontinental ballistic missile. It is planned that by the end of the year, the first such system will be put [on combat duty](#)". The disinformation is that in 2021, Putin has already made a similar statement, but its conditions were not fulfilled. Later, in 2023, Putin will mention Sarmat missiles again.

Despite Russia's use of nuclear intimidation as an instrument of hybrid warfare, on the eve of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty Review Conference (NPT Review Conference), held **from 1 to 26 August 2022**, the Russian side suddenly began to declare the need to ensure the security of the international community. In particular, Russian President Vladimir Putin stated:

"There can be no winners in a nuclear war and it should never be unleashed. We stand for equal and indivisible security for all members of the global community."

At the opening of the 10th Review Conference of the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons, Russian representative Alexander Trofimov said that Russia was not going to use nuclear weapons. These statements were made against the backdrop of the fact that Russian troops who seized the Zaporizhzhya NPP did not allow IAEA inspectors to enter the territory of the nuclear power plant. This was stated at the conference by the representative of Ukraine, Mykola Tochytskyi. However, Oleksandr Trofimov denied this thesis, saying that "Russian troops do not seize nuclear facilities, but take them under protection", and that Zaporizhzhya NPP was taken under protection "solely to prevent nationalist groups and foreign mercenaries from organising [a nuclear provocation](#)".

**On 21 September 2022**, Putin directly accused Western powers of using nuclear blackmail against Russia. The narrative was also that it was Ukrainian troops, encouraged by the West, who were shelling the territory of the Zaporizhzhia nuclear power plant, not the Russian Federation, [which controls the plant](#).

Referring specifically to the West's nuclear blackmail, Putin also resorted to threats to use nuclear weapons and stressed that Russia possesses more advanced strategic weapons than NATO countries. Putin concluded by saying:

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"In the event of a threat to the territorial integrity of our country, we will certainly use all means at our disposal to protect Russia and [our people](#)."

Interestingly, the statement was made in the context of the start of partial mobilisation in Russia, which was undoubtedly intended to incite even greater hostility towards the West and Ukraine among the Russian population.

**On 1 October 2022**, against the backdrop of Russia's loss of an important stronghold in eastern Ukraine - the city of Liman - the head of the Chechen Republic, Ramzan Kadyrov, criticised the Russian high command for their failures and said that the Kremlin was now obliged to consider the use of low-yield [nuclear weapons in Ukraine](#). Kadyrov justified this decision by the fact that the day before, Russia had declared the "accession" - de facto annexation - of four Ukrainian regions, including the city of Lyman in Donetsk Oblast, and consequently, according to Ramzan Kadyrov, these territories were under Russia's nuclear umbrella and it was now obliged to defend them.

**During the content analysis, we noticed that in the spring and winter of 2022/2023**, there was a certain "lull" - a decrease in the frequency of official statements by Russian officials regarding the use of nuclear weapons against Ukraine. This is likely due to the fact that Russia at that time was fully focused on striking at Ukraine's energy infrastructure and the media coverage was mainly focused on this.

**On 25 March 2023**, Putin announced the deployment of tactical nuclear weapons in Belarus. In particular, it was noted that 10 aircraft of the Belarusian Air Force are already ready to use [this type of weapon](#). In addition, according to Putin, Russia handed over the Iskander system to Belarus, which can also be a carrier of tactical nuclear weapons. Putin added that he had been asked by Alexander Lukashenko to deploy this type of weapon, and stressed that Russia would do so "without violating its international obligations on the non-proliferation of nuclear weapons." According to Putin, the pretext for Russia's actions was allegedly "the UK's supply to Ukraine of ammunition with depleted uranium cores [for Challenger 2 tanks](#)". Accordingly, Ukraine's use of weapons with such ammunition was regarded by the Russian side as the use of weapons "with a nuclear component". However, it is worth noting that the UK immediately accused Putin of lying, as depleted uranium is a standard component of weapons, and such shells are also in service with the Russian army. However, the Russian Federation was of little interest in the objective situation. Thus, in June 2023, according to the Belarusian dictator, Alexander Lukashenko, Belarus received part of the promised nuclear weapons, for which the Soviet storage facilities were restored [on the territory of the country](#).

**On 5 July 2023**, the Deputy Chairman of the Russian Security Council, Dmitry Medvedev, once again spoke about the Russian-Ukrainian war:

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"Any war, even a world war, can be ended very quickly. Either by signing a peace treaty or by doing what the Americans did in 1945 when they used their nuclear weapons and bombed two Japanese cities. They really ended the military campaign then. [The price was the lives of almost 300,000 civilians.](#)"

Soon after, **on 11 July 2023**, a public debate sparked in Russia about the feasibility of using nuclear weapons against Ukraine or Western countries, in which even [Vladimir Putin](#) took part. The debate was initiated by Sergei Karaganov, Honorary Chairman of the Presidium of the Foreign and Defence Policy Council. In mid-June 2023, he wrote an article stating that "the military operation [in Ukraine] cannot end in a decisive victory without imposing a strategic retreat or even [surrender on the West](#). Therefore, it is first necessary to frighten the West with the readiness to use nuclear weapons, and then, if essential, to strike "a group of targets in a number of countries to bring to mind those who have lost their minds". This provoked a strong reaction, as Karaganov is considered a representative of the Russian expert mainstream. Most experts did not support his idea. Vladimir Putin did not support it either, stating that he was against the use of nuclear weapons because, firstly, "there is no such need", and secondly, the very reasoning on this topic "lowers the threshold" for its use".

In his speech at the Valdai Forum in Sochi, held **from 2 to 5 October 2023**, Putin said that Russia had almost completed the development of the Sarmat missile before launching its [mass production](#).

"We just need to settle some bureaucratic formalities before it is mass-produced and put on combat duty. This will happen in the near future."

**At the same time**, Putin announced that "Russia has conducted the latest successful test of a global-range cruise missile with a nuclear power plant "[Burevestnik](#)". This statement was eagerly picked up by Russian propaganda media, spreading information that the missile is "capable of completely destroying urban areas and large military facilities" and has "an almost unlimited range, which will allow it to manoeuvre over neutral waters for a very long time and strike on command". The third main point made by Putin was the familiar reminder that a Russian strike in response to a nuclear attack by a potential aggressor would leave no chance of survival for any opponent. Putin also reminded that Russia's military doctrine has two reasons for the country's possible use of nuclear weapons. The first is an enemy nuclear attack on Russian territory, which would be followed by a retaliatory strike. The second is a threat to the existence of the Russian Federation, even if conventional weapons are used against the country. After that, one of the founders of the Valdai Club, the aforementioned Sergei Karaganov, asked the President whether it was time for Russia to change its nuclear doctrine, hinting at his vision of a victorious end to the war in Ukraine. Putin replied that there was no need to change Russia's nuclear doctrine, but that it could consider withdrawing its ratification of the Nuclear Test Ban Treaty to "mirror" the position of the United States, which had signed but delayed ratification of the treaty and "maintains its own nuclear infrastructure".

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Accordingly, already **on 18 October 2023**, the lower house of parliament, the State Duma, unanimously passed in the second and third readings a bill that revokes Russia's ratification of the 1996 Comprehensive [Nuclear-Test-Ban Treaty](#). Despite the withdrawal, Russia has so far stated that it will remain a signatory to the treaty and will continue to provide data to the global monitoring system that alerts the world to any nuclear tests. However, when presenting the bill to the State Duma, Vyacheslav Volodin, the Chairman of the State Duma, suggested that Moscow might withdraw from the treaty altogether.

Soon after, **on 21 February 2023**, Putin announced that Russia was suspending its participation in the New START treaty with the United States, which was signed by former US President Barack Obama and his Russian counterpart Dmitry Medvedev in 2010 and aimed at limiting the number of strategic nuclear warheads that the United States and [Russia could deploy](#). Putin said that he was "forced to announce that Russia is suspending its participation in the treaty" because the West, he said, was directly involved in attempts to strike Russian strategic air bases. Earlier this month, however, Russia said it wanted to keep the treaty in place despite the "destructive US approach to arms control".

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## Nuclear Doctrine of the Russian Federation

Russia's current posture on the role of nuclear weapons in its policy is stipulated in the Decree of the President of the Russian Federation No 335, dated July 2<sup>nd</sup>, 2020, "On the foundations of the state policy of the Russian Federation [in the field of nuclear deterrence](#)." According to the document, the Russian Federation views nuclear weapons exclusively as a means of deterrence, the use of which is an "extreme and involuntary measure." Nuclear deterrence is perceived as a complex process encompassing not only the nuclear sphere itself but also comprising coordinated political, military, technical, diplomatic, economic, informational, and other measures. Such deterrence is aimed at ensuring that potential adversaries understand the "inevitability of retaliation" in the event of aggression against Russia. Nuclear deterrence is primarily directed against individual states and military coalitions that regard the Russian Federation as a potential adversary and possess nuclear weapons or other types of weapons of mass destruction or significant combat potential of conventional forces.

However, while stating that nuclear weapons are reserved purely for deterrence and retaliation and can be used only in extreme cases of direct existential threats to the state, the document leaves some place for uncertainty. For one, the Decree lists the primary security concerns, which might develop into military threats requiring that nuclear deterrence be exercised "depending on changes in the politico-military and strategic situation." The concerns in question include:

- the build-up of general-purpose force groupings that include nuclear weapon delivery vehicles in territories bordering the Russian Federation and in adjacent sea areas;
- the deployment of missile defence systems, medium-range and shorter-range cruise and ballistic missiles, high-precision non-nuclear and hypersonic weapons, strike unmanned aerial vehicles, and directed energy weapons by states that regard the Russian Federation as a potential adversary;
- the deployment of missile defence and strike systems in space;
- the possession by other states of nuclear weapons or other types of weapons of mass destruction that could be used against the Russian Federation, as well as means of delivery of these types of weapons;
- uncontrolled proliferation of nuclear weapons, means of their delivery, technologies, and equipment for their manufacture;
- deployment of nuclear weapons and means of their delivery on the territories of non-nuclear states.

The resort to the use of nuclear weapons is possible under one of the four prerequisites identified in the President's Decree, which are:

- Russia receives reliable information about the launch of ballistic missiles that attack its territory and that of its allies;

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- the adversary uses nuclear weapons or other weapons of mass destruction against Russia and its allies;
  - the adversary is acting against Russia's critical civil or military facilities, which could disrupt the response of Russian nuclear forces;
  - Russia is attacked with conventional weapons that threaten the very existence of the state.

The Decree fails to present specifics as to what to consider an existential threat to the state's existence or what "changes in the politico-military and strategic situation" should suffice to entail such a radical response. Therefore, technically laying out a "counter-strike" strategy, Russian nuclear doctrine leaves the state's political leadership with all the tools necessary to ensure the desirable interpretation of its provisions in each case.

Using such flexibility in interpretation allows Russia to employ elements of nuclear deterrence in different cases that would not normally coincide with the common sense understanding of specific developments and actions. This could also fall under the provisions of paragraph 4 of the Presidential Decree, which inter alia states that the policy in the sphere of nuclear deterrence guarantees averting escalation and halting hostilities on conditions acceptable to Russia and its allies.

Even though this framework does not provide an exhaustive understanding of how Russia intends to act in certain situations, it does offer a clarification of Russian military and security policy in various spheres.

### **Evolution of Russian Nuclear Doctrine**

The 2020 Decree became the first document of such kind in the Russian Federation. Previously, these matters would be held strictly classified. The political purposes and military strategies concerning nuclear deterrence were laid out in unpublished USSR and Russian documents and could only be elicited from individual statements of certain state officials.

Soon after the collapse of the USSR, Russia started adapting its nuclear policy posture to the post-Cold War world. Nuclear weapons became crucial to maintaining great power status and helped compensate for weakened political institutions and conventional military. One of the first notable adjustments occurred in 1993 when the principle of no first use of nuclear weapons adopted during the last years of USSR existence was rejected. Successive national security strategies and military doctrines would place a greater emphasis on nuclear factor. On the doctrinal level, the feasibility of the use of nuclear weapons was first admitted in the [1997 national security concept](#), and several years later, in 1999, the deployment and operation of nuclear weapons was first officially included in the army training exercises.

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The first mention of circumstances in which Russia might use nuclear weapons was published in the [2000 military doctrine](#). It included some of the points present in the current documents but did not delve into details. The consequent modifications of Russian strategic documents either repeated the previous points concerning these issues or provided minimal or superficial coverage thereof.

Therefore, even being as vague as they are, the provisions of the [2020 Presidential Decree](#) described in the previous section became a certain revelation in comparison to what the Russian and foreign public had had a chance to get before. The beginning of the full-scale aggression against Ukraine, followed by a surge in Russian nuclear rhetoric and threats, which will be the focus of the following chapters, also sparked a debate on the need to update the strategic outlook of the Russian Federation on the issue of nuclear deterrence and use of nuclear weapons. However, while the information space has been flooded with various deliberations on this topic – from expanding the nuclear doctrine to occupied Ukrainian territories and using strategic nuclear weapons against Western countries providing support to Ukraine to exploding a nuclear device over the Russian region of Siberia – the Russian officials voiced confidence that the current nuclear doctrine is up to date and comprehensive enough not to require any modifications.

### **Comparative analysis of nuclear doctrines of the nuclear powers**

The only nuclear power [capable of fully opposing](#) the Russian Federation in the nuclear stand-off, both in terms of physical capacities and other resources, is the United States of America. For a while, the issue of strategic security encompassing the nuclear arms race has been at the center of bilateral relations between the states. The system of treaties dedicated to reducing the probability of nuclear war between them had been meticulously built up since the last quarter of the previous century and not that meticulously deconstructed by the recent actions of both American and Russian leaders.

The American '[nuclear posture review](#)' is regularly updated and published. The latest document, dated 2022, underscores the strategic challenges faced by the US and justifies its rejection of the 'no first use' strategy by the fact that the country is facing multiple threats, including those from other nuclear states. The US admits the possibility of using nuclear weapons for defensive purposes, particularly to defend the essential national interests of the US and its allies and to prevent a nuclear strike from another party. At the same time, the threat or use of nuclear weapons against a non-nuclear state is ruled out.

The two European nuclear powers – [France](#) and the [UK](#), possessing the fourth and fifth nuclear arsenals in the world, respectively – have quite similar approaches to formulating their approach to the use of nuclear weapons. Both state that nuclear weapons are reserved for the last resort and should be used only for the purposes of deterrence and maintenance of peace. The potential cases of the use of nuclear weapons include extreme circumstances of self-

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defense and the protection of their NATO allies. However, the countries' nuclear doctrines state that they purposefully adhere to maintaining ambiguity as to when, how, and to what extent they intend to react to certain security challenges requiring the deployment of their nuclear forces.

Another approach can be seen in the doctrines of [India](#) and [China](#), which abide by the 'no first use' principle. Thus, in these countries' strategies, the use of nuclear weapons could be used only for retaliation for similar strikes against their territories. China has been particularly articulate about its "exceptional restraint" in the issues concerning nuclear weapons. India also permits the use of nuclear weapons in response to attacks employing other types of weapons of mass destruction. Indian officials have voiced some ideas about reviewing their posture in favor of allowing preventive strikes, but these debates have not brought any fruit so far. The reason for such concerns in India mainly lies in the nuclear doctrine of its neighbor and strategic opponent – Pakistan – which envisages an opportunity of the first nuclear strike even if it has been attacked with conventional means only.

A particularly interesting case is presented by the [Democratic People's Republic of Korea](#). It is a small, isolated state relying on nuclear weapons to maintain its regime and achieve foreign policy objectives by threatening its vis-s-vis. The North Korean nuclear posture has been outlined in a 2022 law that complemented the previous policy in the sphere while adhering to the main principles laid out in the 2013 doctrine. The current strategy envisages the use of nuclear weapons in the event of an attack with the use of any kind of weapons of mass destruction, an attack on the leadership of the country, the necessity to achieve a decisive victory in a war, circumstances causing existential threat to the existence of the North Korean state and people. At the same time, North Korean legislation prohibits any talks on denuclearization and provides for an opportunity of the first nuclear strike.

While the Russian nuclear doctrine contains some elements inherent to other nuclear powers, it is interesting to note that it coincides with the North Korean one both in general approach to outlining the threats requiring the use of nuclear weapons and in specific details outlined in the strategic documents dedicated to this topic.

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## Conclusions

**Firstly**, an important conclusion about Russia's nuclear blackmail strategy is that officials' threats about Russia's potential use of nuclear weapons are periodically interspersed with Russia's actions or imitation of actions that are also intended to cause nuclear paranoia among Ukrainian and Western citizens. For example, Russia conducts nuclear exercises (such as those held on 19 February 2022, on the eve of the invasion), withdraws from treaties restricting nuclear weapons testing (for example, on 18 October 2023, Russia withdrew its ratification of the 1996 Comprehensive Nuclear-Test-Ban Treaty). In other words, the actions are a practical demonstration of the Kremlin's narrative about Russia's enormous nuclear potential.

**Secondly**, it should be noted that the primary source of most of the most significant and resonant statements is the President of the Russian Federation, Vladimir Putin. It is he who is the main actor involved in nuclear blackmail of Ukraine and Western countries. It follows that the planning of what narratives about nuclear weapons will be disseminated by lower-ranking Russian officials, the media and Russian propagandists takes place at the highest level and is tightly controlled and regulated by Putin's security team. In addition to the President, nuclear blackmail is mainly carried out by the Deputy Chairman of the Russian Security Council, Dmitry Medvedev; Honorary Chairman of the Presidium of the Foreign and Defence Policy Council, Sergei Karaganov; and the Head of the Chechen Republic, Ramzan Kadyrov, who officially take a much more radical position on the role of nuclear weapons in the Russian-Ukrainian war than Vladimir Putin, who has recently rejected the need to use Russia's nuclear potential.

**Thirdly**, there is a trend that the number of official threats by Russian officials to use nuclear weapons against Ukraine or NATO countries increases when circumstances - whether in the international arena or on the battlefield - become more unfavourable for Russia. For example, Russia is more likely to use nuclear blackmail when the Ukrainian military regains control of previously occupied cities or when Western powers intensify the supply of military equipment to Ukraine.

**Fourthly**, the situation before forums or conferences, such as the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty Review Conference (NPT Review Conference), which took place from 1 to 26 August 2022, is the opposite of the above. Before such events, Russia's rhetoric turns into the rhetoric of a peacemaker who does not want a nuclear war and is trying hard to prevent it.

**Finally, it is necessary to highlight the key narratives used by Russia to implement nuclear blackmail:**

- Russia will launch an immediate nuclear strike if Russian statehood is threatened.

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At the same time, the term "threat to Russian statehood" remains an undefined concept for the international community. And as the practice of the Russian-Ukrainian war shows, the scope of this term is gradually narrowing as the West "crosses" the "red lines" drawn by the Kremlin, providing Ukraine with more weapons and imposing more sanctions on Russia.

- Russia's response in the form of the "SVO", but in fact a full-scale invasion of Ukraine, was correct and timely, as the West was pushing Ukraine to become a nuclear power.

The disinformation is that, firstly, Ukraine was not going to become a nuclear power, especially since the circumstances of 2022 were not conducive to this. Secondly, it would be extremely illogical for the West to push Ukraine to acquire nuclear weapons, as this would potentially lead to a nuclear war with Russia or pose a threat to the West itself. Thus, these arguments are used exclusively to justify a full-scale invasion of Russia.

- "Russia stands for equal and indivisible [nuclear] security for all members of the international community". At the same time, it is not the Russian Federation that is using nuclear blackmail, but Western countries and Ukrainian troops, who, in particular, are "shelling the ZNPP". Russia is only responding to nuclear blackmail with blackmail. The consequence of this narrative is the statement that Russia does not carry out provocations at nuclear facilities. It is only protecting Ukrainian NPPs "solely to prevent nationalist groups and foreign mercenaries from organising a nuclear provocation [at them]".

The narrative that Ukrainian nationalist groups and foreign mercenaries carry out nuclear provocations at the ZNPP is not true, because, firstly, the ZNPP is controlled by the Russian Federation, and secondly, at least in Ukraine, there are no nationalist groups and foreign mercenaries. At the same time, the "protection" narrative is extremely widespread. The Russian Federation uses it to justify not only the seizure of Ukrainian NPPs and the creation of a potential nuclear threat to the world, but also the seizure and annexation of new territories.