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Nuclear weapons analysis

Russia's Updated Basic Principles for Nuclear Deterrence
A Broom for All Corners?

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On 25 September 2024, President Vladimir Putin discusses forthcoming changes to Russia's nuclear deterrence policy at a meeting of the Russian Security Council's standing conference on nuclear deterrence, an entity of unclear function and status (Image: www.kremlin.ru).

During the full-scale war of aggression against Ukraine, Russia has repeatedly emphasised the risk of nuclear escalation, issuing thinly veiled threats of nuclear use should the West continue its military aid to Ukraine or intervene in the conflict. Now, Russia has updated its *Basic Principles of State Policy of the Russian Federation on Nuclear Deterrence*, a document central to its declaratory nuclear policy and to the strategic planning process for nuclear deterrence. The key questions are: What are these changes, and how should they be interpreted? This memo describes the most important updates in Russia's declaratory nuclear policy and examines what they reveal about changes in Russian objectives, measures and thinking regarding its nuclear weapons.[1]

Structure

The memo begins with a discussion of the *Basic Principles of State Policy of the Russian Federation on Nuclear Deterrence*, referred to in short as *Basic Principles*. It then examines the value and limitations of studying this document as a means of understanding Russian thinking on nuclear weapons. Following this, under five separate headings, it explores the most important areas of change in the revised *Basic Principles*: the countries against which Russia conducts nuclear deterrence and threatens use, the conditions under which nuclear weapons may be employed, the countries it commits to defending with nuclear weapons, the military dangers that nuclear deterrence is intended to neutralise, and finally the structure and constraints of its nuclear

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arsenal. The conclusion takes stock of the main revisions and reflects on what they may entail.

A document for communication and planning

Russian President Vladimir Putin approved the updated *Basic Principles* on 19 November 2024.[2] The revised document replaces the previous iteration published in 2020, which marked the first time Russia made the *Basic Principles of State Policy of the Russian Federation on Nuclear Deterrence* publically available.[3]

The *Basic Principles* serves a dual purpose. As a strategic planning document, it identifies federal priorities, goals and measures for Russia's nuclear deterrence policy. Its aim is to steer policy implementation across different levels of government, state agencies, and state-owned companies. The format is not unique. The federal government establishes similar basic principles for a range of policy areas, including the Arctic and the strengthening of traditional values. However, the actual implementation of Russian strategic planning documents in other policy areas has been inconsistent at best.[4]

The *Basic Principles* is also the main instrument of Russia's declaratory nuclear policy. It communicates to adversaries and both external and internal stakeholders what Russia seeks to deter with nuclear weapons. In line with this, the document explains the purpose and main characteristics of Russia's nuclear deterrence, including its view on nuclear weapons in both national and international security, as well as the conditions under which they may be used.

There is a distinction between the *Basic Principles* and Russia's nuclear doctrine. A state's nuclear doctrine consists of officially accepted concepts and principles for the employment of nuclear weapons, alongside guidelines for force structure and future development. It provides political leaders with nuclear options to achieve military objectives. Without access to highly classified material, however, its full scope remains ultimately unknowable.[5]

As such, the *Basic Principles* is neither a precise blueprint nor a strict constraint determining when Russia would employ nuclear weapons. Any decision by the Russian president to use nuclear weapons would be political and contingent on the specific conflict at hand. It may not necessarily align with declared policy. There is value in ambiguity: a degree of uncertainty regarding nuclear decision-making in crisis situations may be thought to enhance deterrent effects.[6]

The *Basic Principles* can only take us so far in understanding nuclear doctrine or anticipating nuclear use. Such enquires are better addressed by studying nuclear capability and military exercises. Yet, it can give an indication of how Russian views on nuclear deterrence and the role of nuclear weapons in conflict may change. Revisions in the *Basic Principles* could signpost coming adjustments in posture and force development.

Threatening non-nuclear and indirect adversaries

The updated *Basic Principles* places greater emphasis than before on considering non-nuclear states and states that support aggression (as defined by Russia) as targets for Russian nuclear deterrence. In particular, the document states that Russia will direct nuclear deterrence towards countries that provide their territory (land, sea, or airspace) or resources for the preparation or execution of aggression against Russia. It further declares that Russia will consider aggression by a non-nuclear adversary, if supported or joined by a nuclear-armed party, as a joint attack by both. In a similar vein, Russia will now consider aggression from a member of an alliance or coalition as an attack by the military bloc as a whole.[7]

It is not new to Russian declaratory policy that non-nuclear and supporting states may become targets of nuclear weapons. In the previous version of the *Basic Principles*, both nuclear-armed states and states with significant conventional military capabilities were already in focus.[8] The new provisions recall the language of the Russian Military Doctrines of 1993 and 2000 as well as a 1995 UN declaration. At that time, Russia declared that it could employ nuclear weapons against non-nuclear parties of the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) if they acted in association or in an alliance with a nuclear-armed state.[9] This was likely directed at new NATO members, rather than non-nuclear states in general. The later Military Doctrines of 2010 and 2014 did not repeat this wording.

Part nuclear intimidation, part existing practice

The renewed emphasis on non-nuclear states likely relates in part to Russia's experience in its war against Ukraine. From Russia's perspective, it is fighting a non-nuclear adversary supported by a nuclear alliance. It has issued more or less thinly veiled nuclear threats to stop or else limit Western backing. Russia now attempts to buttress its nuclear threats by codifying them in key deterrence documents. The message to NATO allies, particularly non-nuclear European states, is that they could become targets of nuclear retaliation even if they do not participate directly in the conflict. The new provisions on co-aggression and joint attacks from military alliances serve a similar purpose.

While the updated document was expected, its release was likely timed to amplify intimidation effects. Its publication coincided with Western deliberations over whether to allow Ukraine to conduct deep strikes into Russia using donated long-range precision-strike systems. Kremlin Spokesperson Dmitry Peskov warned that such actions would be considered an act of aggression and could trigger a nuclear response.[10] No such response materialised. But, shortly thereafter, Russia employed for the first time what President Putin described as a new dual-capable intermediate-range ballistic missile, Oreshnik, in Ukraine.[11]

There is, however, an inherent credibility problem with Russia's nuclear threats. While Russian intimidation may have delayed and constrained Western military aid to Ukraine, it has not stopped it. Simply put, the West has not found it credible that Russia would choose to escalate the war in Ukraine into a direct military confrontation with NATO over the issue of military support. The failure to halt Western assistance has fuelled debate in Russian policy and military circles over the lack of coercive credibility in Russian nuclear threats. Some experts have argued that Russia must reinforce its verbal intimation with forceful action.[12]

Yet not all of this is coercion. Indeed, the heightened focus on non-nuclear states as potential nuclear targets in escalation management dynamics reflects Russian military thinking, exercise patterns, and force posture. Russian military thinking has long emphasised the role of non-strategic nuclear weapons (NSNW) in regulating the intensity and scope of conflict. There is a notion that NSNW strikes, or the threat thereof, may enable Russia to end a regional war on terms it finds acceptable or else prevent escalation into a larger-scale conflict.[13] Since the late 1990s, Russian large-scale conventional exercises have recurrently concluded with simulated use of NSNW, including against non-nuclear states.[14] This aligns with Russia's force structure: Russia maintains a substantial arsenal of non-strategic nuclear warheads and continues to invest in modern dual-use systems.[15] In this sense, the revisions to the *Basic Principles* may have brought declared policy closer to actual doctrine.

Change and continuity in conditions for nuclear use

The updated *Basic Principles* introduces new conditions for nuclear use. In the 2020 version, these conditions were fourfold: adversary use of weapons of mass destruction (WMD) against Russia or its allies; an incoming ballistic missile attack; attacks on critically important military or state objects, the failure of which would prevent a nuclear response; and a large-scale conventional attack that threatens the very existence of the state.[16]

First use

The situation in which a conventional attack would trigger nuclear use has been changed to "critical threats to the sovereignty or territorial integrity" of Russia or Belarus.[17] This change also evokes Russian declaratory policy of the 1990s and early 2000s. Moscow abandoned the official Soviet-era no-first-use policy in 1993 and declared in 2000 that it would resort to nuclear weapons in situations deemed "critical" to "national security."[18] At the time, this was a compensatory measure for the sharp decline in Russia's conventional military capabilities following the dissolution of the Soviet Union. Accordingly, throughout the 1990s and early 2000s, as funding for conventional forces was dramatically cut, investment in the nuclear deterrent continued.[19] It is likely that the current shift in language reflects a similar rationale. With its conventional forces tied up and worn down in Ukraine, Russia has few other options for power projection.

Fundamentally, in Russian military thinking, nuclear weapons come into play in situations where conventional forces are insufficient to deter an opponent or achieve a military objective. While Russian conventional forces continue to be degraded in Ukraine, Russia will need to rely more heavily on its nuclear arsenal for deterrence and defence. This interplay between the conventional and nuclear domains is integral to the Russian concept of strategic deterrence.[20]

The update also begs the question of what a *non-critical* threat to sovereignty or territorial integrity might look like. Possibly, the Ukrainian incursion into the Russian Kursk region, or Russia's inability to control the full geography of annexed Ukrainian territories, could serve as examples. At the same time, the larger context matters. Risks that may be tolerable in a local or regional conflict with an ostensibly conventionally weaker opponent, such as Ukraine, may become critical in large-scale war with a superior foe, such as NATO.[21]

Considerable uncertainty remains. Both the old and new phrasings—threats to the existence of the state and critical threats to sovereignty and territorial integrity—are highly subjective concepts, not least given the nature of nuclear decision-making. The decision to launch nuclear weapons rests with the Russian President.[22] We cannot know for certain what President Vladimir Putin may consider critical threats in a specific conflict setting. The broad Russian understanding of sovereignty

and Russia's flexible approach to its own borders muddies the waters further.

Launch-on-warning

The new declaration appears to widen the scope of the Russian launch-on-warning (LOW) policy[23] to include not only an incoming ballistic missile attack, but also an incoming massive aerospace attack against Russia. According to the new document, such an attack could come in the form of strategic and tactical bombers, cruise missiles, hypersonic missiles, attack drones, or other airborne platforms. It does not specify whether they are conventional or nuclear.[24]

As with critical threats to sovereignty and territorial integrity, what is considered a *massive* aerospace attack is unclear. A debilitating non-nuclear aerospace attack in a conflict with a technologically superior adversary, such as NATO, has long been a key Russian concern. Western analysts have assumed that nuclear strikes would be among the counteractions considered in such a scenario.[25] As such, while the additions offer clarifications, they add little knew knowledge. The inclusion of attack drones in a document on nuclear deterrence policy is peculiar but likely connected to Russia's experience of drones in the war in Ukraine, including at home. Russia may have concluded that massive drone strikes can have strategic effects.

A nuclear LOW policy is typically about preventing a scenario where an adversary's strike intolerably degrades one's own ability to respond. The capabilities at risk are strategic nuclear forces, political, and military command. A question for further study is whether Russia also considers such assets to be threatened by a conventional aerospace attack, or whether the widened policy has more to do with a concern that critical threats to sovereignty and territorial integrity may arise from such an attack.

Forces deployed abroad

The new policy further clarifies that Russia reserves the right to respond with nuclear weapons to WMD attacks on troops or military objects deployed outside Russian territory.[26] Earlier declarations did not explicitly mention WMD attacks against Russian forces abroad, even though Russia has long-standing military bases outside the country. Russia has repeatedly claimed, without foundation, that Ukraine is using chemical weapons on the battlefield and is developing biological weapons.[27] The policy updates creates a linkage between these accusations and Russian nuclear employment. Russia may come to leverage this link in future nuclear threats.

Extending deterrence to Belarus

The updated Basic Principles more explicitly extends Russian nuclear deterrence to Belarus, including in the event of a large-scale conventional attack that creates critical threats to Belarusian sovereignty or territorial integrity. While both the old and new policy state that Russia would use nuclear weapons in defence of allies, the new document singles out Belarus. The rationale given is the Union State between the two countries.[28]

The inclusion of Belarus is unsurprising and instead reflects realities on the ground. Integration within the Union State has deepened in recent years, increasing Russian influence over Belarus. In 2023, Russia announced that it had deployed NSNW to the neighbouring country, although some uncertainty remains as to whether this has actually occurred. The extension of nuclear deterrence to Belarus, combined with the announced deployment, constitutes the clearest change in Russian policy and posture among the revisions in the *Basic Principles*. The updated *Basic Principles* does make clear, however, that nuclear decision-making remains exclusively in Russian hands, even during foreign deployment,[29] despite Belarusian claims to the contrary.[30]

Nuclear weapons as a solution to all problems

Like the 2014 Russian Military Doctrine, both the previous and updated *Basic Principles* contain a section on military dangers. These dangers could, but will not necessarily, evolve into military threats. The threats, in turn, could lead to war. The role of Russian nuclear deterrence is to neutralise these dangers and threats.[31]

The updated *Basic Principles* expands the list of military dangers to include: blockade of communication lines that could isolate parts of Russia from the rest of country; attacks against environmentally hazardous facilities in Russia, where destruction could have disastrous consequences; the expansion of military alliances and the placement of their military infrastructure close to Russia's borders; and large-scale military exercises near Russia's borders.[32]

Certainly, the broadened list of military dangers may reflect evolving security concerns. The accession of Sweden and Finland to NATO may have heightened Russian fears of a possible blockade of communication lines to its Baltic exclave, Kaliningrad. Similarly, Ukrainian attacks on the Kerch Bridge, connecting occupied Crimea with Russia, could have triggered comparable unease. Russia launched its invasion of Ukraine under the guise of a large-scale exercise; analysts in Moscow will likely scrutinise NATO exercises for similar intent. Meanwhile,

references to environmentally hazardous facilities present a cynical mirror image of Russian attacks against Ukrainian civilian infrastructure, including the destruction of the Kakhovka dam and the occupation of the Zaporizhzhia nuclear power plant. Russia possesses similar facilities on its own territory.

As noted above, while the war in Ukraine continues and Russian forces remain degraded, Russia may perceive itself as unable to address these dangers and potential threats through conventional means alone. In such a scenario, nuclear weapons become necessary to ensure deterrence.

At the same time, the expanded list of dangers represents a remarkable broadening of the nuclear deterrence mission. It introduces objectives for nuclear deterrence that extend far beyond its primary task of deterring aggression. While the 2014 Military Doctrine also characterised expansion of adversary alliances, military exercises, and military infrastructure as dangerous, it did not explicitly link these concerns to nuclear policy.[33] The updated *Basic Principles* does.

Russian unease over adversary military infrastructure near its borders is no surprise. It has been a cornerstone of Russian security policy for decades. However, NATO allies would likely struggle to determine at what point a military exercise within their own territory might be deemed dangerous enough to warrant a nuclear response. Nuclear deterrence works best when associated with vital interests, where high stakes lend credibility to threats. It becomes less effective in situations where adversaries struggle to understand the danger.[34]

Arms control and nuclear numbers

The updated *Basic Principles* removes all references to arms control.[35] This was expected and continues Russia's movement away from arms control instruments, both in the nuclear and conventional domains. Russia has suspended its participation in the New Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (New START) while declaring it will abide by the treaty's cap on deployed nuclear warheads and carriers until it expires in 2026. Russia appears to be developing intermediate-range ballistic missile strike capabilities that were previously banned by the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty.[36]

The revised text also hints at a potential increase in nuclear numbers. The previous document stated that the structure and composition of the nuclear arsenal should be maintained at a "level, which is minimally sufficient" to achieve the deterrence mission.[37] The new version has dropped reference to a minimal level, instead speaking simply of a "sufficient level."[38] This trend is not unique to Russia. China is rapidly expanding its nuclear forces,[39] and a recent report by the US Secretary of Defense noted that in the current security environment, "it may be necessary to adapt current U.S. [nuclear] force capability, posture, composition, or size."[40]

Taking stock

The new *Basic Principles of State Policy of the Russian Federation on Nuclear Deterrence* does not constitute an overhaul of Russia's declared nuclear policy. Much of the new document aligns with existing policy, adding only further detail and clarification. Importantly, some revisions confirm what Western analysts have already inferred about Russian nuclear doctrine through the study of declared policy, military thinking, exercises, and nuclear force structure. But, despite these clarifications, considerable uncertainty persists. This is partly due to the subjectivity of key concepts such as sovereignty, territorial integrity, or critical threats, but also because of the nature of the *Basic Principles* document itself. It illustrates the limits of studying declaratory policy to gauge the likelihood of nuclear employment.

If the announced deployment of nuclear weapons to Belarus is realised, it will mark a noteworthy change in both policy and posture, suggesting a corresponding shift in doctrine. However, its consequences would be limited. The 2022 invasion of Ukraine demonstrated that Russia already has the ability to deploy forces and weapon systems in Belarus at will. Compared to dual-use systems in Kaliningrad or longer-range systems deployed from mainland Russia, the added range from a forward deployment in Belarus is marginal. Moreover, such weapons would be more vulnerable to Western strikes.[41] The rhetoric around the announced deployment also highlights the discrepancy in the Russian interpretation of the NPT. Russia has long claimed that the placement of U.S. nuclear weapons in allied countries under NATO's nuclear sharing arrangements violates the NPT. Now, instead, President Putin has justified the own deployment to Belarus by comparing it to NATO nuclear sharing while also maintaining that it complies with Russian obligations under the NPT.[42]

Importantly, the new *Basic Principles* lays bare Russia's increasing reliance on its nuclear arsenal to address a broader range of security concerns, both within and beyond the scope of military conflict. This shift is partly about coercion. Russia uses declaratory policy as a tool in its nuclear intimidation campaign over Western military aid to Ukraine. Nuclear weapons are also leveraged in its push for a new European security architecture. The updated *Basic Principles* makes clear that

nuclear deterrence should ensure the rollback of NATO military presence and infrastructure in Eastern Europe and prevent new members from joining the alliance. While the Russian political leadership has recently signalled openness to discussions on strategic arms control with the United States, it is likely that Russia will seek to link such talks to a broader agreement on European security in its favour.[43]

The increased reliance on nuclear weapons also serves as an offset strategy for conventional weakness. This need to lean on the nuclear dimension will persist beyond any potential ceasefire in Ukraine, as rebuilding conventional military capacity will take time. As a result, Russia will continue to emphasise its vast nuclear arsenal in deterrence and coercion messages directed at the West, particularly at Europe, while sustaining investment in its nuclear forces. This is especially relevant for Russia's NSNW arsenal, which is seen as fulfilling both a regional deterrent function and, if necessary, a role in regional warfighting.[44] A key question to monitor is whether this increased reliance on nuclear weapons will lead to new requirements for force structure and posture.

However, by expanding the list of problems that nuclear weapons are expected to fix, far removed from their core objective of preventing aggression, Russia risks diluting its own deterrence message. In the eyes of the West, Russia's nuclear rhetoric and repeated hinting at so-called red lines, which have subsequently been crossed by the West, have raised well-founded doubts about the credibility of its nuclear threats.

This issue is also recognised within Russia. As Russian nuclear expert Aleksey Arbatov put it, in what can only be understood as a carefully worded critique of Russian nuclear rhetoric during the war:

> "Nuclear deterrence, in terms of the tasks that were set for it—this is the prevention of nuclear aggression or a large non-nuclear war like World War II—worked quite well in the past and still works today. It is not intended for smaller-scale local conflicts; nuclear deterrence is too powerful an instrument. It is not a broom with which you can sweep all corners."[45]

The new *Basic Principles* will not resolve this tension; it may even deepen it.

It might be tempting to dismiss all Russian nuclear messaging as empty threats, but doing so would be a mistake. There is certainly a point when Russia would seriously consider nuclear use. The *Basic Principles* remains one of Russia's main public instruments for signalling where that threshold might lie. For Western policymakers and analysts, sifting credible deterrence messages from coercive threats in Russian nuclear messaging will remain an important task going forward. ■

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Endnotes

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