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Nuclear Deterrence in Europe

Russian Approaches to a
New Environment and
Implications for the United States

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Prepared for the United States Air Force

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Summary

The Cold War is over, but its legacy lingers in both the United States and Russia as the two countries continue to shape and define their current and future relationship. Among the positive ways in which this relationship differs from that of the past is both sides' genuine belief that they no longer face one another as perpetual adversaries on constant guard against an opponent willing to use nuclear weapons. Within their new relationship, they are prepared to draw down the strategic nuclear forces that defined the central hostility of the Cold War. And yet, within this relationship there is still a nonviolent, but real, conflict of interests as Russia struggles to come back from its period of weakness and assert great-power status.

Looking back, the deterrent framework established by the Soviet Union and the United States comprised clearly stated vital interests and the deployment of large numbers of conventional and nuclear weapons. Through presidential statements, formal alliances, and military deployments, the United States and the Soviet Union extended deterrence to include their North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) allies and Eastern European allies, respectively. Military doctrine was written and exercises were undertaken to demonstrate the capacity of the weapon systems.

Using these same elements, this monograph focuses on uncovering the characteristics of Russia's emerging deterrent framework beyond central strategic nuclear deterrence. (See Table S.1.)

Russia has made clear that, given its conventional inferiority to plausible adversaries, including the United States and NATO, it might be forced to use nuclear weapons in response to a conventional attack

Table S.1
Analytic Framework and Examination of Current Russian Deterrent Policy

Framework Element	Russian Policy and Actions
Authoritative statement of claimed interests	Russia claims privileged status in neighboring countries under the Medvedev Doctrine.
Military doctrine and practice	<p>Military policy and past doctrine recognize that local conflicts can draw other states into regional conflicts that might pit Russian forces against NATO or American forces who will win unless Russia resorts to first use of nuclear weapons to “de-escalate military actions.”</p> <p>Current published doctrine indicates that Russia will not consider the use of nuclear weapons except in the case of a weapons-of-mass-destruction threat to Russia or its allies or a conventional threat to the existence of the Russian state, leaving the question of what level or form of escalation could create such a threat.</p>
Force development and posture	<p>Current and near-term Russian forces reflect a focus on preparing ground forces for local conflicts rather than seeking to replicate American capabilities for “sixth-generation” warfare (i.e., employment of advanced conventional weapons, automated control systems, radio-electronic combat, precision strike, and weapons based on new physical principles). Russian retirement of legacy strategic nuclear programs represents a change from the past theory of stability, embodied in the Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (START) program and founded on retiring multiple independently targetable reentry vehicle (MIRV) missile systems. ICBMs continue to be the privileged leg of the triad. Given current trends and START counting rules, Russia may be moving toward a lopsided, ICBM-heavy force structure.</p>
Major exercises and scenarios	<p>Large military exercises, used during the Cold War both to rehearse war plans and to communicate political resolve to one’s adversary, have had a revival. To the extent that these exercises are presented publicly, since 1999 they have considered the case of local conflicts growing to regional wars with intervention by highly capable Western forces and eventual Russian recourse to nuclear weapons. Over time, the number of types of strategic systems that appear in such exercises has broadened—whether their purpose is to demonstrate a range of capabilities to observers or to showcase particular systems or services for internal resource decisions is unclear. In late September 2009, the Zapad-2009 exercise modeled a large-scale air and ground attack on Belarus, but it is unclear whether nuclear use was played in the exercise. In mid-2010, Vostok-2010 presented a scenario of battling illegal nonstate actors with tanks, warships, and fighter aircraft—as well as possibly a nuclear mine.</p>
Endorsement of doctrine, forces, and exercises by political authorities	<p>Reversing the political-military estrangement of the Yeltsin administration, Presidents Vladimir Putin and Dmitry Medvedev endorsed military doctrines that allowed for first use of nuclear weapons and conspicuously endorsed military exercises that included launch of strategic systems through 2009. In 2010, Medvedev endorsed the new doctrine and appeared at the Vostok-2010 exercise, but he has been less visible in explaining the meaning of exercises and any connections to the use of nuclear weapons. At the same time, Medvedev has been more visible internationally in support of new arms control agreements.</p>

by such adversaries on Russia or its allies. Moreover, in asserting its power and making claims for its regional interests, Russia seeks to dissuade the United States and its NATO allies from expanding into regions where Russia claims interests and to deter unilateral U.S. or NATO intervention in the event of local conflict. In the past, recognizing conventional inferiority to the United States and NATO has led Russia to imply the potential for first use of nuclear weapons in this context, although Russia's most recent doctrine appears to walk back from that formulation. These discussions raised the possibility of nuclear weapon use that did not involve large intercontinental exchanges or preemptive nuclear strikes. Rather, limited nuclear strikes using bombers, intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBMs), and non-strategic nuclear weapons (tactical nuclear weapons lack the range for such strikes, and intermediate-range nuclear weapons are prohibited by treaty) were envisaged.

However, Russia's new military doctrine, adopted in February 2010, declares nuclear weapon use to be limited to situations in which an adversary threatens Russia or its allies with nuclear or other weapons of mass destruction or situations in which a conventionally armed enemy threatens Russia's very existence. This suggests that Russia's leadership has made a decision to preclude the use of nuclear weapons as described above. This somewhat contradicts past statements, including those made by Russian officials before the doctrine was announced, regarding Russia's intentions.

The new doctrine leaves Russia's privileged interests unchanged; it simply raises questions as to how they will be defended, and under what circumstances. In seeking to both dissuade expansion and deter military intervention in peripheral conflicts in which Russia is involved, Russia faces the challenge of communicating its interests and intentions to other states and gaining support within its own political and military apparatus for the policies envisaged. While this new framework inherits legacy forces, programs, and elements of military doctrine from the Soviet Union, they are being shaped, changed, and, in some cases, discarded to adapt to Russia's new environment and purposes. Russia's evolving deterrent framework does not encompass the whole of Russian policy or strategy, but it is a recognizable new ele-

ment that is noticeably different from the past and appears to still be in flux. Russia's deterrent framework should be taken as part of Russia's reassertion of great-power status, its views of its relationship with the United States, and its evolving position on the role of nuclear weapons in its security planning.

In considering how to respond to Russia's claims of interest in its bordering states and its opposition to further NATO expansion, the United States must make judgments about Russia's likely views and actions. While a number of other strategic considerations must also inform these decisions, decisionmakers and planners were faced, prior to the publication of the February 2010 doctrine, with the possibility that, in the absence of formally or informally recognizing these Russian interests, the United States could be drawn into a conflict that could escalate to Russian use of nuclear weapons. Such a possibility seemed not to be captured fully by existing NATO or American planning or declaratory policy. In the context of the new doctrine—because of the disconnects between the new doctrine and past exercises and evident policy directions—and absent further clarification, U.S. and U.S. Air Force decisionmakers cannot be fully confident about precisely under what circumstances Russia will consider using nuclear weapons, or what sort of nuclear use it might consider.

Prior to the publication of the February 2010 military doctrine, it would have been reasonable to argue that, to avoid having to decide in the moment whether they are prepared to respond with nuclear weapons and what weapons might be used, the United States and NATO would need to undertake planning for the changed military environment and geography in Europe. This would require an awareness of what sorts of actions and operations raise the risk of a Russian nuclear response or action, and planning accordingly so as to minimize that risk. In some cases, this would suggest avoiding certain actions and operations; in others, it might require more explicit and direct communication with Russia in planning and preoperational stages than might otherwise be deemed necessary, in order to prevent misunderstandings and misperceived signals (or actions erroneously viewed as signals) on both sides. It would also raise the adequacy of dual-capable aircraft (DCA) as the sole surviving element of in-theater nuclear forces. In the

face of the new doctrine, there may be less call to worry about possible nuclear exchanges with Russia, except in circumstances where Russia feels that its existence, or that of an ally or allies, is at risk. However, recognition of Russia's interests, consideration of what responses it considers adequate short of nuclear use, and improvement of communication protocols remain called for.

There are also benefits to considering the implications of Russia's new stated nuclear doctrine in the context of its evolving force structure. Stability based on past arms control constructs (START) and on signaling with strategic nuclear bombers to promote intrawar deterrence will need rethinking, given Russian ICBM and submarine-launched ballistic missile (SLBM) force developments, as well as prospective reductions in strategic nuclear weapons under the new START agreement. Future arms control negotiations can usefully take these issues into account. Retaining the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Force (INF) Treaty needs to be a critical U.S. goal, given that a denunciation would make available more nuclear weapons in situations the United States is trying to prevent. Similarly, existing understandings on the exchange of information on long-range nuclear sea-launched cruise missiles (SLCMs) at least give some bounds on the possible size and, presumably, origin of nuclear attacks based on SLCMs.

In the meantime, Russian policymakers and analysts continue to emphasize the strategic deterrence mission of their country's nuclear arsenal and to raise concerns that U.S. missile defense programs do or will undermine Russia's capacity to deter a U.S. nuclear strike. This discussion revives fears and assertions made during the "Star Wars" era and revisits some of the same proposed responses, such as launch on warning. However, key elements of the command and control and early missile launch warning systems that would support such a response have not been modernized nor given priority attention.

From the perspective of the U.S. Air Force, there are a number of implications of Russia's evolving doctrine:

1. During the Cold War, one contribution of the Air Force was the development of a cadre of officers with deep understanding of the Soviets as a military opponent. This expertise was based on

extensive experience and study. In any situation in Europe that involves, or risks developing into, conflict with the Russians, there will be a need for this deep knowledge and an ability to inform senior political and military leadership on “what comes next” as situations develop.

2. As the principal component of the American ability to wage “contactless war,” in which precision-strike assets destroy ground-based forces, the Air Force should expect that any Air Force operations against Russian forces must be planned and conducted in light of at least the possibility of Russian nuclear use.
3. Operations under a nuclear shadow demand that the Air Force not deploy for European operations in predictable patterns that present an adversary perceived opportunities to remove what it might interpret as threats to the survival of the state (its own or an ally’s) with small nuclear attacks that promise both definite effects on the battlefield and “de-escalation of military actions.”
4. Any actions in Europe to support American operations elsewhere have been and will be observed by a Russian military more interested in us than we are in it. It is critical that operational planning take this into account and that planners and operators take steps to prevent Russia from mistaking operations and actions as unintended “signals.”
5. Nuclear systems based in the continental United States are becoming more important for any theater nuclear roles.