

BRYAN FREDERICK, SAMUEL CHARAP, SCOTT BOSTON, STEPHEN J. FLANAGAN, MICHAEL J. MAZARR,
JENNIFER D. P. MORONEY, KARL P. MUELLER

Pathways to Russian Escalation Against NATO from the Ukraine War

The potential for further escalation in the ongoing war in Ukraine is a significant concern. Although much of this escalation will surely be directed against Ukrainian forces and civilians, horizontal escalation by Russia—that is, the act of expanding the conflict to include other actors (Morgan et al., 2008), specifically the United States and its North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) allies—has become plausible, though not inevitable. It is this prospect of horizontal escalation that poses perhaps the most acute of dilemmas for U.S. policymakers who are trying to help Ukraine while simultaneously avoiding a great power war. This Perspective describes four plausible horizontal escalation pathways. To develop these pathways in a timely manner, we did not conduct new research but instead drew from RAND Corporation expertise in Russian foreign policy, Russian and Ukrainian military capabilities, U.S. and NATO militaries, and deterrence and escalation dynamics.

Identifying Pathways to Intentional Russian Escalation

This Perspective summarizes the most plausible pathways that could lead to a Russian decision to target NATO member states during the current conflict, describes the circumstances under which Moscow might undertake

such actions, and lays out how U.S. and allied actions—including ongoing military assistance to Ukraine—could affect each pathway’s likelihood. Figure 1 provides an overview of these pathways.

Although the potential for accidental escalation is of concern, our focus is on the conditions under which Russia might purposely choose to target NATO forces and

FIGURE 1
Potential Escalation Pathways

| Pathway | Preconditions for Escalation | Steps to Escalation |
|---|--|---|
| <p>Pathway 0 Escalation spiral that could have already begun</p> | <p>[Preconditions for this pathway, such as comprehensive sanctions on Russia and extensive military assistance to Ukraine, already exist.]</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Russia eventually decides to retaliate for U.S. and NATO measures that are already being implemented. • Moscow’s preoccupation with war in Ukraine might have delayed the response. • Such an escalation would likely begin with non-kinetic attacks. |
| <p>Pathway 1 Preemption against perceived NATO intervention in Ukraine</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Political pressure for intervention in Ukraine intensifies in NATO member states. • New NATO long-range strike capabilities are deployed in eastern flank member states. • Volunteers from NATO member states participate in Ukraine war. • Russian conventional capabilities are significantly degraded. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Russia perceives imminent risk of NATO intervention in Ukraine. • Escalation could begin with an immediate move to kinetic strikes on NATO forces or territory. • Nuclear use is plausible. |
| <p>Pathway 2 Interdiction of NATO allies’ military assistance to Ukraine</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • NATO members transfer more-powerful capabilities to Ukrainian military. • Moscow is convinced that halting allies’ assistance to Ukraine is necessary to avoid defeat. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Russia could first try covert or non-kinetic strikes. • Kinetic strikes could follow, targeting either logistics nodes or unrelated targets chosen for coercive effect. |
| <p>Pathway 3 Domestic instability in Russia sparks aggression</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Domestic instability in Russia increases dramatically. • The Kremlin perceives a Western role in fomenting the unrest. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Escalation could begin with non-kinetic attacks. • If NATO retaliates, eventual kinetic conflict is possible. |

nations, both to allow governments to prepare for such possibilities and, hopefully, to reduce their likelihood.¹ Pathway 0 is numbered accordingly because it could already be underway; the others are not listed in any particular order. This Perspective concludes with key considerations for U.S. policymakers regarding these potential escalation pathways.

Pathway 0: Escalation Spiral That Could Have Already Begun

With a rapidity and severity that has surprised most observers, as well as the Russian leadership, the United States and its allies have already imposed tremendous costs on Russia both through comprehensive economic sanctions and related restrictions and through the large volume of military support that has been, and continues to be, provided to Ukraine. As of this writing, Moscow has yet to respond directly in any substantial manner, even though these actions have both immiserated Russia and led to the death of many Russian soldiers. There are a number of possible explanations for this inaction. The Kremlin's preoccupation with its faltering campaign in Ukraine might be consuming senior leaders' limited bandwidth—bandwidth that would be required to plan or approve such a response. Alternatively, the Russian leadership might not want to start a second war while it still has not accomplished its objectives in the current conflict.

Nonetheless, Russian retaliation is likely to come in due course. Although a direct military attack on NATO member states is unlikely, Moscow could undertake a variety of highly disruptive actions, such as cyberattacks on critical infrastructure, assassinations of military or

political figures, or sabotage or covert action against targets that support Ukraine. The Kremlin might believe that taking such actions is necessary to undermine U.S. and European willingness to impose costs on Russia, or even that retaliation is required as a matter of national honor. Depending on the damage that the Russian actions cause, the United States and its allies might feel compelled to respond. Such a tit-for-tat escalatory spiral could lead both sides to take increasingly assertive actions, which could eventually lead to a kinetic clash.

Pathway 1: Preemption Against Perceived NATO Intervention in Ukraine

The most acute risk of a Russian decision to escalate directly to a kinetic strike on NATO allies would result from Moscow perceiving that large-scale, direct NATO attacks on Russian military forces in Ukraine are imminent. Such perceptions might be preceded by more-limited NATO member states' involvement in the Ukraine conflict, or force posture enhancements on the eastern flank. In such circumstances, Moscow might believe that it has little choice but to blunt the damage that NATO can inflict by first striking key allied capabilities.²

Adding to this risk, Russia's conventional long-range missile magazine has been significantly depleted in the war in Ukraine, leaving Moscow with less capability to conduct conventional strikes on key NATO targets in Europe. If Russia becomes convinced that a NATO intervention is imminent, the Kremlin therefore might either

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immediately resort to its nonstrategic nuclear weapons (NSNW) or it might do so much earlier in the conflict than it would have if its conventional capabilities had not been degraded in the war in Ukraine. Although the decision to use such weapons would have momentous consequences, Russian military doctrine and training have long prepared for the employment of NSNW as a warfighting capability.

We identify several potential circumstances that could lead Russia to view NATO entry into the war as imminent or inevitable.

First, **public outcry against Russian war crimes could create the impression of a political drive to intervene.** The brutality of Russia's campaign in Ukraine appears likely to continue, which, in turn, will further increase public outrage in NATO countries and amplify calls to take action that would stop the carnage. With the economic and diplomatic isolation of Russia already at near-maximum levels, there will likely be intensifying calls in key NATO capitals for more-direct military actions to defeat Russia or otherwise coerce it into stopping its campaign. Although

allied governments might recognize the risks of such steps and refuse to take them, large-scale public outcry, particularly if supported by current or former government officials, could carry risks of escalation. Russia might begin to question whether allied governments are prepared to stand up indefinitely to these pressures. In such circumstances, Russia could infer that direct NATO intervention has become highly likely, or even inevitable, regardless of what official NATO government statements say. Russian military strategists have extensively studied the likely form that a NATO first strike on Russian forces would take, and a large-scale aerospace attack on key military targets appears to be the scenario of most consistent concern (Iagol'nikov and Smirnov, 2014; Malyshev and Bogatyrev, 2014). If Russia perceives heightened readiness or forward deployment of NATO long-range strike assets along with intensifying political pressures for intervention, it could decide to strike first at key allied-enabling capabilities. Russian escalation could begin by conducting cyberattacks on military communications or reversible counterspace actions (e.g.,

dazzling or temporary disabling of satellites), which could limit further NATO member states' actions.

Second, **Moscow could misinterpret ongoing NATO efforts to enhance the alliance's defensive capabilities on its eastern flank as forces being deployed to enable a first strike against Russia.** Although even thousands of additional ground forces deployed to Poland, Romania, or the Baltic states are unlikely to have such an effect on their own, other capabilities that would enable strikes deeper into Russian territory could do so. The Kremlin has been concerned that long-range NATO strike capabilities could enable a decapitation attack against Russia's military or political leadership (Frederick et al., 2017). If Russia assesses that such capabilities are being deployed near its borders, it could decide that a preemptive strike is necessary to avoid the risk that a first strike by NATO could leave Moscow without the ability to respond. Furthermore, as already noted, the depletion of Russian conventional strike capabilities in the Ukraine war could push Moscow to make such a decision sooner than it would have before the conflict or to employ NSNW in its response.

Third, given the high levels of U.S. and allied support for Ukraine during the conflict and the increasing number of volunteers from NATO member countries fighting for Kyiv, **Russia might conclude that NATO has already effectively intervened directly in the conflict.** Russia could view the presence of such individuals, particularly those with military training or backgrounds, as evidence that NATO allies have decided to send their own armed forces to fight in Ukraine. Recent deliveries of sophisticated weapons systems to Kyiv, including those that Ukraine does not have a history of employing, could lead Moscow to assume that NATO trainers or other technical advisers

accompanied the hardware. If such actions lead Russia to believe that NATO is already fighting in Ukraine, Moscow could undertake covert operations against targets in NATO territory to signal its willingness to respond in kind. If such operations led to substantial damage or were publicly disclosed, they could create pressure for allies to retaliate.

The goal of any preemptive Russian strikes would presumably be to rapidly coerce NATO to not undertake further military operations. Given the large number of precision-guided missiles that it has expended in the Ukraine war thus far, Russia is likely even more concerned about how it would fare in a prolonged conflict with NATO. This concern could increase escalation risks by putting Russian leaders in the position of believing they must terrify NATO out of military action quickly at the outset of a potential conflict.

Pathway 2: Interdiction of NATO Allies' Military Assistance to Ukraine

If Moscow concludes that its ability to achieve its war aims is in jeopardy because of the support that the United States and other NATO members continue to provide to Ukraine, it might decide to take steps to interrupt the flow of such assistance. There are several historical examples of states expanding the geographic scope of conflicts to strike at enemy supply lines.³

Russia is unlikely to strike supply lines inside NATO member states before attempting to interdict aid inside Ukraine—an approach it began taking in April. These conditions could change if NATO allies provide quali-

tatively more potent military capabilities to Ukraine or, perhaps more importantly, if Russia suffers major setbacks on the battlefield. New or additional capabilities that Russia might be more motivated to interdict because of their potential effects on the conflict could include medium- or long-range air defense systems and long-range precision-strike systems. But interdicting forms of military assistance that have already been flowing to Ukraine for weeks, months, or years could also begin to seem imperative if Russia cannot achieve its aims in its desired timeframe. Moscow would be more likely to interdict military aid in the event that a Ukrainian counterattack or insurgency is seen as being largely fueled by the NATO assistance.

If Moscow perceives that interrupting further external assistance to Ukrainian forces is critical, and if Russian efforts to accomplish this inside Ukraine prove unsuccessful, then the Kremlin might decide to strike relevant targets within NATO territory (such as supply depots and airfields receiving aid deliveries) either to cut off the flow of weapons closer to their sources or to coerce NATO into ceasing or limiting this assistance. Hitting one target is unlikely to have a significant operational impact on supply lines, so Russia might strike NATO targets that are not directly related to the transfer of assistance as a way of coercing allies to curtail their support.

Russian interdiction efforts within NATO member states need not be missile strikes; they could instead entail cyber, covert, or other gray-zone activities designed to interrupt the flow of materiel while reducing escalation risks. Russia reportedly undertook such an effort relatively recently: Press accounts suggest that Russian operatives covertly destroyed an arms depot in the Czech

Republic in 2014 (Eckel, Bedrov, and Komarova, 2021), presumably to prevent the weapons it contained from being shipped to Ukraine.

Attacks on NATO member states' facilities would lead to Article 5 consultations and, at a minimum, likely trigger additional mobilizations and deployments of NATO forces (NATO, 1949). Such strikes could also generate intense political pressures for retaliatory strikes against Russian targets, likely including those assets or bases involved in launching the attacks, particularly if NATO personnel or citizens have been killed.

In considering their next move, U.S. decisionmakers would need to weigh the requirement to reinforce Article 5's credibility by underlining U.S. resolve to respond to any and all attacks on NATO territory or forces, the military value of continuing to provide supplies to Ukrainian forces, and the escalation risks of directly retaliating against Russia. Further escalation could occur following NATO retaliatory strikes for numerous reasons, including if the strikes are publicly embarrassing for the Kremlin, which could incentivize Russia to demonstrate its own resolve. Additionally, the strikes could destroy capabilities that Russia believes are essential for its defense against further NATO attacks, triggering countervailing actions that Russia believes would even the scales.

Pathway 3: Domestic Instability in Russia Sparks Aggression

A dramatic increase in domestic, economic, and political instability in Russia also could lead the Kremlin to decide to attack NATO member states. Crucially, Russian leaders see antigovernment protests as a key element of a

potential Western-backed campaign to overthrow their regime. According to Russian strategists, several other components of such a campaign are taking place: instability on Russia's periphery, a buildup of U.S. forces near Russian borders, and Western economic warfare (Podberezkin, 2015, p. 303). Eventually, these strategists say, this campaign would culminate in direct kinetic strikes on the homeland. Therefore, Moscow is more likely to see large-scale protests that begin in the current environment as evidence of a coordinated Western campaign to topple the Russian government. Against this backdrop, officials from the United States or other NATO governments speaking openly about the possible "physical elimination" of President Putin, as one NATO foreign minister put it ("Luxembourg Foreign Minister Calls . . .," 2022), or highlighting the prospect that domestic unrest would depose the current regime, could heighten the Russian leadership's perceptions that popular discontent is driven by U.S. or allied intelligence operations and therefore constitutes a non-kinetic attack on the homeland. The Kremlin would likely conflate the security of the regime and the security of the country.

To plausibly affect the Kremlin's calculus about horizontal escalation, instability would have to grow significantly in size and scope beyond the relatively small antiwar

protests that took place during the first weeks of the war in major cities. However, as opposed to the war itself, the dramatic economic contraction that has resulted from the war might well be the spark for such broader popular unrest once economic pain is felt over the medium to long term. The protests would likely need to reach the point where they threaten to exceed the Russian government's ability to control them before Moscow would contemplate taking actions abroad.

Because the Russian government would likely view protests of this scale as a non-kinetic NATO attack, it might decide to strike NATO allies to compel a cessation of external support for the domestic threat. Russian responses are more likely to begin with non-kinetic attacks (e.g., cyberattacks against critical infrastructure targets such as power grids, power plants, or key information or telecommunications systems, including satellites) in an effort to dissuade future perceived NATO aggression at minimal cost. If these attacks are successful in substantially disrupting U.S. or allied economic and political life, the United States or other allies might feel compelled to respond in kind by disrupting similar systems within Russia. Such attacks, which would compound existing stresses from the war, could lead Russian leadership to conclude that it has exhausted non-kinetic

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A Russia-NATO war is far from an inevitable outcome of the current conflict. U.S. and allied policymakers should be concerned with specific pathways and potential triggers, but they need not operate under the assumption that every action will entail acute escalation risks.

options for reducing NATO threats to regime survival and therefore decide to turn to kinetic attacks.

Conclusion

Concerns that the war in Ukraine will escalate to a Russia-NATO clash are warranted. The Kremlin's brutal invasion has spurred the alliance into arming Moscow's adversary and imposing punishing costs on Russia. From the Russian leadership's perspective, the theater itself could not be of greater significance; Ukraine has long been seen as a core national security concern. The pathways to horizontal escalation—i.e., a deliberate Russian decision to attack NATO—identified in this Perspective are plausible scenarios for the conflict's evolution, particularly as the war (as of this writing) drags on without a decisive Russian victory.

The four pathways pose different kinds of risks. Currently, we see little evidence that the trigger for Pathway 1—a belief in Moscow that a NATO intervention is imminent—is present, but, should that change, an immediate escalation to a Russian kinetic attack would be plau-

sible. By contrast, escalation in the other pathways is more likely to begin non-kinetically and evolve through a spiral dynamic to a kinetic clash. The first key precondition for Pathway 2 is clearly present, given the quantity of ongoing NATO assistance to Ukraine. However, the second precondition under which Moscow would have a strong incentive to attack NATO targets for interdiction purposes—that assistance has begun to turn the conflict dramatically against Russia—has not materialized. Pathway 3 is entirely contingent on a development—widespread unrest in Russia—that has not occurred as of this writing. The spiral described in Pathway 0 is plausibly already underway, and therefore should be of immediate attention for policymakers; however, it should be possible to arrest further escalatory dynamics if certain efforts are undertaken, some possible options for which we highlight below.

Therefore, although escalation risks stemming from the Ukraine war are real and significant, the preceding analysis helps to bound those concerns: A Russia-NATO war is far from an inevitable outcome of the current conflict. U.S. and allied policymakers should be concerned

with specific pathways and potential triggers, but they need not operate under the assumption that every action will entail acute escalation risks.

Our assessment of these escalation pathways highlights several key considerations for U.S. policymakers:

- Continue to signal that the United States and NATO allies have no plans to directly enter the conflict. Given ongoing U.S. and allied efforts to assist Ukraine and to impose costs on Russia, such signals will be important to reduce the possibility of Russian misinterpretation and miscalculation. This intended restraint could be communicated both directly and through public statements.
- Increase force presence in the east and focus on capabilities that strengthen NATO's defensive posture without appearing to enable a first strike on Russia. The United States, in particular, should carefully scrutinize the forward deployment of long-range air and naval strike capabilities that could enable a decapitation strike on the Russian leadership.
- Holistically consider all new NATO activities and deployments in the east to avoid creating a false impression of preparation for offensive action. Pacing new deployments over time could be an effective means of mitigating this risk.
- Keep the locations inside NATO territory that are used to transfer military assistance or provide training to Ukraine dispersed and covert, wherever possible. If Moscow is convinced that strikes on a relatively small number of targets could substantially undermine the assistance effort, then it is more likely to attack. Conversely, if a large number of strikes

would be required to have an operational impact and the targets are difficult to identify, a Russian kinetic interdiction effort would be less likely.

- Maintain the message discipline that NATO's goal is the cessation of conflict, not the end of the Putin regime. Leaders' statements that directly call for regime change can increase the risks that the Kremlin would see escalation to direct conflict against NATO as necessary for regime survival.
- Recognize the danger that more than one of the escalation pathways described in this Perspective could occur at the same time. Although each pathway is dangerous in isolation, if the preconditions for escalation from multiple pathways appear simultaneously, the escalatory pressure could be much more significant. A protracted stalemate in Ukraine could also serve to increase that pressure.
- Remain vigilant that an escalatory spiral could be slow-moving. Escalation could begin gradually and in non-kinetic ways, starting with relatively small steps. It need not represent an all-at-once leap to a higher level of violence.
- Anticipate possible Russian actions and map out responses to them that are specifically calculated to achieve U.S. goals without prompting escalation. The United States and its allies could be the engine of escalation as easily as Russia could—that is, any possible NATO-Russia escalatory spirals are as likely to stem from what the United States and its NATO allies do as they are to stem from Russia's actions.

Notes

¹ In practice, there is no definitive line separating intentional and inadvertent escalation. Miscalculation can play a significant role within the pathways to intentional Russian escalation. Moreover, a NATO decision to escalate to direct attacks on Russia cannot be ruled out, although we treat such a decision as beyond the scope of this Perspective.

² Germany's invasion of Norway in April 1940 provides a historical example of such a preemptive attack. In that case, Berlin's concerns that Britain would seize Norwegian territory to attack German supply lines precipitated an invasion (Lunde, 2009).

³ Perhaps the most notable example of this is the U.S. decision to expand the war in Vietnam to attack targets in Laos (Correll, 2006) and Cambodia (U.S. Department of State, Office of the Historian, undated).

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About the Authors

Bryan Frederick is a senior political scientist at the RAND Corporation. His research interests include interstate deterrence and escalation, military interventions, territorial disputes, and regional security issues in Europe and East Asia.

Samuel Charap is a senior political scientist at the RAND Corporation. His research interests include the foreign policies of Russia and the former Soviet states; European and Eurasian regional security; and U.S.-Russia deterrence, strategic stability, and arms control.

Scott Boston is a senior defense analyst at the RAND Corporation. His research focuses on land warfare, with particular emphasis on Russian military capabilities and ground force concepts and modernization.

Stephen J. Flanagan is an adjunct senior fellow at the RAND Corporation. He served in several senior positions in government, most recently as special assistant to the president and senior director for defense policy and strategy at the National Security Council (NSC) from 2013 to 2015.

Michael J. Mazarr is a senior political scientist at the RAND Corporation. His primary interests are U.S. defense policy and force structure, disinformation and information manipulation, East Asian security,

nuclear weapons and deterrence, and judgment and decisionmaking under uncertainty.

Jennifer D. P. Moroney is a senior political scientist at the RAND Corporation and manages many of RAND's security cooperation-related projects for Department of Defense clients.

Karl P. Mueller is a senior political scientist at the RAND Corporation. He specializes in research related to military and national security strategy, particularly coercion and deterrence.

About This Perspective

This Perspective identifies potential pathways to escalation to a broader conflict between Russia and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) that could arise from the ongoing Russian invasion of Ukraine. Greatly increased U.S. and NATO allies' military assistance to Ukraine and economic sanctions on Russia have created concerns about escalation to a direct Russia-NATO conflict. This Perspective highlights key considerations for U.S. policymakers seeking to manage this risk.

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