

BRYAN FREDERICK, SAMUEL CHARAP, KARL P. MUELLER

Responding to a Limited Russian Attack on NATO During the Ukraine War

The unprecedented steps that the United States and its North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) allies have taken to support Ukraine and punish Russia since Moscow launched its full-fledged invasion have raised concerns about possible Russian retaliation against the alliance. Although U.S. and NATO planners have long focused on preparing for the contingency of an outright conflict with Russia, the Ukraine war has created a unique set of circumstances that make a more limited Russian attack plausible.¹

In the event that such a Russian attack were to occur, the U.S. Department of Defense would be asked to produce response options for U.S. policymakers' consideration. This Perspective offers a framework for generating those options and choosing among them. We sought to answer the following questions: What are the principles that should govern such decisions? What sort of response is more likely to advance U.S. interests while limiting the risk of escalation, and on what circumstances might the answer to that question depend?

In this Perspective, we examine the factors that U.S. policymakers should consider if they are faced with a *limited* Russian attack—ranging from a one-off strike on an isolated military target to a broader barrage against multiple civilian and military sites—on U.S. or allied targets in Europe or outer space. This Perspective outlines the characteristics of the potential Russian attack relevant to informing a response, including Moscow’s possible motivations for launching the attack, what the United States and its allies could try to accomplish in a response, and how different types of U.S. or NATO responses might help to advance U.S. goals in the conflict.

Identifying Categories of a Potential Russian Attack and Possible Motives

The specific characteristics of a Russian attack (also referred to as *Move 1*; see Figure 1) will play an important role in determining the most advisable U.S. or NATO response (also referred to as *Move 2*). The characteristics of Move 1 create different strategic and political incentives

FIGURE 1
Sequence of Potential Russian and U.S. or NATO Actions



for Move 2 and might signal different Russian intentions and willingness to threaten further escalation. We assume for the purpose of this analysis that Move 1 is a kinetic strike against a target on the territory of a NATO ally in Europe, even if the target is a U.S. military facility, or a U.S. or NATO military asset operating in outer space.² We excluded an attack on the U.S. homeland from consideration because such an attack would produce a very different decisionmaking calculus. We also assume that the strike does not involve the use of chemical, biological, or nuclear weapons—again, because the use of such weapons would entail a dramatically different set of response options.

A potential Move 1 in the current context could vary across at least the seven following characteristics:

- attack against a civilian versus a military target³
- military casualties or damage caused by the attack
- civilian casualties or damage caused by the attack
- intentionality of any casualties (or lack of casualties)
- number of targets hit
- significance of U.S. or NATO military capabilities adversely affected by the attack
- political symbolism of the target(s).

Although a given Move 1 could have any combination of these characteristics, we can broadly summarize the potential combinations into three categories of intensity:

- *Demonstrative attack*. This category refers to attacks that might be meant to send a message or communicate resolve but do not cause significant physical damage or have an impact on NATO’s military capabilities. Such an attack would produce minimal if any military or civilian casualties. It would be a one-off attack, calibrated to put the onus on

the other side to either escalate or back down. For example, Moscow could strike an empty airfield, rail junction, or military structure inside NATO territory with a small number of cruise missiles.

- *Focused attack.* This category refers to attacks involving strikes on a single target or a small number of related targets. Such an attack could inflict some limited casualties and would likely have an impact—at least for a time—on certain NATO military operations or provision of assistance to Ukraine. Indeed, this impact on NATO operations would likely be part of the Russian objective. However, the targeted sites would not be central to NATO’s overall military capabilities. For example, Russia could conduct simultaneous strikes inside NATO territory against multiple targets involved in the assistance effort for Ukraine.
- *Less-restrained attack.* This category refers to attacks on military and civilian targets that produce substantial casualties, potentially to both civilian and military personnel, or large-scale damage. These targets could be of significant importance for either military operations or civilian life. Such a Move 1 would fall between the circumscribed assault envisioned in the focused attack and an unrestrained attack on a wide range of targets.⁴ For example, Russia could attack several key NATO air bases and port facilities throughout Europe in a manner that would at least temporarily degrade NATO capabilities, reinforcement potential, or both.⁵

The higher on this scale that a Russian attack is, the more difficult structuring a U.S. or NATO response that avoids escalation to general warfare is likely to be. A more

destructive, more sustained Russian attack that is targeted against more politically or militarily sensitive targets will create pressures for a substantial, kinetic U.S. or NATO response, as discussed below. Given the circumstances of the ongoing war in Ukraine, it is also likely that the more destructive Move 1 is, the greater Russia’s desperation in the conflict. U.S. or NATO responses might therefore need to balance multiple competing goals, including preventing further escalation and avoiding rewarding Russian efforts at coercion.

In addition to the military characteristics of the Russian attack, the motives for Move 1 are important to consider when devising a U.S. or NATO response. A Russian attack might be accompanied by an explicit statement of Russian motivations, but it might not be, or the stated motivations might not reflect Russia’s genuine goals. In the present circumstances, three potential Russian motivations for Move 1 are most plausible:⁶

- *Coercing the cessation or limitation of U.S. and NATO support for Ukraine or punishment of Russia.* U.S. and NATO efforts to provide Ukraine with military and other aid while punishing Russia directly for its aggression through economic and diplomatic means appear to have had a major effect. Ukraine has used the assistance it has received to great operational effect, while Western sanctions on Russia have constituted one of the most consequential economic punishment campaigns against a large economy in decades. Russia therefore has strong motivations to coerce the United States and its allies and partners into ending or limiting these efforts, which Moscow could believe to be undermining its ability to win or sustain the war in Ukraine or to

ensure domestic stability. Russian attacks on targets used in the provision of assistance to Ukraine would be the clearest indication that this was the Kremlin's motive.

- *Coercing the United States and its allies to pressure Ukraine to settle the ongoing war on terms favorable to Russia.* Moscow could attack a NATO target to use the threat of escalation to convince the United States and its allies that the risks of allowing the Russia-Ukraine war to continue are too great and, therefore, that they should force Ukraine to agree to a settlement. That is, Russia would be seeking to exploit Ukrainian dependence on the West and Western concern about escalation to drive the United States and its allies to pressure Kyiv to scale back its objectives in the war or cease fighting altogether. Russian attacks under this motivation would more likely be focused on larger-scale cost imposition or the threat thereof against NATO, such as by targeting important economic assets or more-sensitive military capabilities.
- *Tit-for-tat response to a particular U.S. or NATO action that enabled a Ukrainian attack.* Russia could also be motivated to attack NATO assets in response to what it believes to be allied participation in a Ukrainian attack on Russia. For example, should the United States provide intelligence to Ukraine to enable a strike against a high-value Russian target, Moscow could view Washington as having participated in the attack and respond by striking at the U.S. platform that Moscow believes provided the intelligence (e.g., a U.S. military satellite). The Russian motivation would therefore be to deter similar

future U.S. or NATO actions. Russian attacks under this motivation should be more identifiable because they would likely occur in response to specific U.S. or allied assistance to a particular Ukrainian attack that preceded them.

Identifying Potential U.S. Goals in a Response to a Limited Russian Attack

In deciding how to respond to a Move 1 in the current context, U.S. policymakers are likely to have five key goals in mind, the pursuit of which will shape decisions on what type of action to take in Move 2.⁷ Particularly in response to higher-intensity Russian attacks, there might be substantial tension among these U.S. goals, and policymakers might need to make difficult decisions regarding which goals they wish to prioritize:

- *Deter any further Russian attacks.* A fundamental goal for Move 2 would likely be to ensure that Russia does not attack NATO again—either in the crisis precipitated by Move 1 or after that crisis has passed.
- *Avoid further escalation.* A related goal for Move 2 is to avoid escalation to wider hostilities or an all-out war from the current crisis sparked by Move 1. As noted above, the United States and its allies would seek to respond in such a manner that there would be no Move 3, by deterring any further Russian attack on NATO. Should this prove to not be possible, however, the United States still would retain a strong interest in limiting the severity of any poten-

tial Move 3. U.S. policy in the war to date has been guided by a clear imperative to avoid a NATO-Russia war. A limited Russian attack on NATO does not invalidate this objective. The consequences of escalation to an all-out conflict, potentially including the use of nuclear weapons, could be catastrophic. Therefore, U.S. policymakers would be likely to use Move 2 to help ensure that any Move 3 would not be a further escalation toward all-out conflict. For the pursuit of this goal, an understanding of the underlying Russian motivation for Move 1 is particularly important.

- *Undermine Russia's ability to launch further attacks.* Particularly if Move 1 adversely affected U.S. or NATO capabilities, Move 2 might seek to reduce the threat of further such attacks by retaliating against the Russian unit or capability that conducted Move 1.
- *Uphold the credibility of U.S. security guarantees.* A limited Russian attack on a NATO target in the current context is likely to affect not only the United States but also a U.S. ally to whom the United States has made an explicit security commitment through NATO's Article 5. Ensuring that such commitments continue to be viewed as credible by U.S. adversaries is a vital U.S. national interest because it underpins the network of U.S. alliances throughout the world. The United States therefore has strong incentives to ensure that Russia or other U.S. adversaries do not come to believe that they might be able to avoid substantial costs or punishment from the United States should they attack a U.S. ally.
- *Maintain NATO alliance cohesion.* NATO makes major decisions based on consensus. Therefore, maintaining cohesion among its member states—

particularly on key goals, such as countering Russia—is essential. Should the alliance fail to respond to a Russian attack on a NATO ally in a manner that was deemed to be sufficient to deter future such attacks, it could jeopardize the willingness of NATO allies to continue to respond to potential threats collectively, with potentially destabilizing implications. At the same time, some alliance members might oppose a response that they view as too aggressive or escalatory, increasing the difficulty of calibrating the appropriate Move 2.

U.S. policy in the war to date has been guided by a clear imperative to avoid a NATO-Russia war. A limited Russian attack on NATO does not invalidate this objective.

Identifying Options for Move 2

As we identify possible U.S. or NATO options for Move 2, we consider both kinetic and non-kinetic steps that policy-makers could adopt.⁸ We categorized the kinetic piece of a Move 2 along a continuum of proportionality to Move 1.⁹ If a Move 2 has a kinetic component, it could be designed to be less-than-proportional, proportional, or more-than-proportional to a Move 1.

Non-kinetic components to Move 2 could include a variety of coercive measures or diplomatic engagements. Coercive non-kinetic steps could include, for example, cyberattacks (on military facilities or civilian infrastructure), economic sanctions, or the provision of additional arms to Ukraine. Diplomatic engagements would seek talks

over relevant issues. In principle, unilateral steps to address Russian concerns (such as promises to reduce the provision of assistance to Ukraine) could also be considered. It is of course possible to both take coercive steps and pursue diplomacy as part of the same overall Move 2.

We next explore how variations across these two dimensions of a Move 2—the proportionality of a possible kinetic response and the nature of non-kinetic responses—could lead to trade-offs in the pursuit of different U.S. goals. We do so by developing four hypothetical Move 1 scenarios, summarized in Figure 2, which cover various combinations of the three possible Russian motives for an attack and the three categories of its intensity described above. We then illustrate how different Move 2s that vary across these dimensions could plausibly lead to different outcomes.

FIGURE 2
Illustrative Russian Limited Attack Scenarios

Scenario A	Scenario B	Scenario C	Scenario D
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Russian cruise missile strikes against depot in eastern Poland• No casualties, limited effects on NATO operations• Russia publicly ties the strikes to NATO assistance to Ukraine	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Russia destroys U.S. intelligence satellite• No casualties, limited near-term effects on U.S. ISR, but long-term risks incurred because of debris• Russia states attack occurred in retaliation for U.S. ISR support to Ukrainian attacks on Russian forces	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Russian missile attacks against three air bases in Poland and Romania involved in assistance to Ukraine• Roughly two dozen military and civilian casualties, some effects on assistance efforts• Russia promises further such attacks if NATO assistance to Ukraine does not cease	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Coordinated Russian strikes against six key air and sea ports, including Ramstein and Rotterdam• Roughly 200 military and civilian casualties, but limited enduring effects on operations• Russia says the attacks are in response to NATO support for Ukrainian attacks on Russian territory, and it reserves the right to use any means to defend itself

Scenario A

A nighttime barrage of several cruise missiles strikes a depot near an airport in eastern Poland that is a key transit and storage node for the shipment of weapons to Ukraine. The attack destroys some military equipment but produces no casualties, and the airfield itself quickly returns to operations. Russia publicly declares that it is acting out of self-defense to counter the Ukrainian “aggression” that has been enabled by NATO allies’ arms shipments. Russia states that it has no intention of conducting any further strikes on NATO as long as weapon deliveries to Ukraine cease. This attack would qualify as demonstrative in terms of intensity.

Key Considerations

- A deliberately restrained Move 1 presents unique challenges. On the one hand, Moscow has crossed a critical threshold and directly attacked a U.S. treaty ally—a step without precedent that requires a strong response to uphold U.S. credibility. On the other hand, the limited nature of the attack leaves open the possibility of a similarly restrained or even entirely non-kinetic retaliatory option that could fulfill other U.S. goals.
- Should NATO refuse to be coerced into ceasing support for Ukraine, the motivations that Russia had for undertaking the attack would remain in place. Therefore, if U.S. policymakers wish to avoid further Russian attacks, it will likely be necessary to take other steps to change Russian calculations.
- A more-than-proportional kinetic response has the potential to signal U.S. and NATO resolve and limit

- Russian incentives for further escalation, given the alliance’s advantage in conventional capabilities.
- Furthermore, more-intensive U.S. or NATO kinetic responses could open political space within the alliance to also engage Russia diplomatically, should the United States and NATO desire to do so.
 - On its own, a proportional kinetic response—even on Russian territory—would likely be less escalatory than highly coercive non-kinetic measures, such as extremely devastating cyberattacks, given the much more limited effects of the proportional kinetic response.
 - Relatedly, the U.S. government can be more confident in its estimation of both the physical and the political effects of a retaliatory cruise missile strike than a massive cyberattack or extreme economic sanctions that might have more unpredictable effects on both Russia and other states.
 - However, should the United States prefer to respond entirely non-kinetically, whether because it wishes to avoid the escalatory risks of a strike on Russian territory or otherwise, these non-kinetic responses would likely need to be significant in scale or effect to maintain the alliance’s cohesion. Allies—and particularly the ally whose territory was hit—that favor responding with kinetic force will likely demand a stronger signal of resolve.
 - A Move 2 that is limited entirely to non-kinetic coercive options might be interpreted in Moscow as demonstrating a lack of resolve to respond kinetically, which could increase Russian incentives for escalation.

The relative asymmetry of U.S. and Russian reliance on space creates additional challenges for any symmetrical U.S. response.

Scenario B

A U.S. intelligence satellite is destroyed by a Russian direct-ascent anti-satellite weapon. The destruction of the satellite has limited immediate effects on U.S. operations, because other satellites are quickly retasked to compensate. However, the attack generates thousands of pieces of debris in low earth orbit, creating the potential for collateral damage to additional U.S. and non-U.S. satellites. Moscow states that it took this step in direct retaliation for the provision of operational intelligence to Ukraine for use in the targeting of Russian forces and that if this assistance continues it will take additional steps to curtail this practice. This attack would qualify as a focused attack on the intensity scale because it did affect military operations and caused a significant material loss to the United States.

Key Considerations

- Responding by conducting a similar kinetic attack against a Russian satellite is problematic because of the potential for generating additional orbital debris, which could begin to affect the viability of low earth orbit for both commercial and intelligence uses.
- The relative asymmetry of U.S. and Russian reliance on space creates additional challenges for any symmetrical U.S. response. A U.S. response that uses non-kinetic means to disable a single Russian satellite might well be viewed as an acceptable cost by Moscow and might not deter Russia from future attacks on space-based assets. Indeed, Russia might believe that tit-for-tat exchanges of satellites with the United States will work to its overall advantage in terms of both military effects and coercive leverage. Washington might therefore need to focus its response in other domains to deter Russia from continuing such attacks.
- The United States could respond kinetically against Russian terrestrial targets, despite the potential escalation concerns, to underline for Moscow the costs that the United States is prepared to impose in retaliation for further attacks against its space-based assets. However, although it crossed a hugely significant escalatory threshold, the Russian attack did not cause casualties or terrestrial damage, potentially complicating efforts to identify a proportional response if a similar type of attack on a Russian satellite is off the table. For example, kinetic strikes against the Russian platforms that undertook this Move 1 would likely generate casualties and would represent an attack against targets inside Russian

territory; therefore, such strikes could be perceived as escalatory. Retaliatory attacks against other, less directly related terrestrial targets would involve similar or greater challenges regarding escalation risks and signals about proportionality.

- Russia's attack is likely to generate widespread condemnation—possibly even from states that had previously avoided condemning Russia's actions in Ukraine—given the risks to the space activities of all nations that the attack, and any further escalation in space, poses. The United States could find that efforts to harness this condemnation to tighten economic and diplomatic pressure on the Kremlin to cease its war in Ukraine prove more effective than they have in the past. Therefore, it is possible to imagine that a non-kinetic coercive response such as much broader sanctions could have a significant impact on Russia.
- The Russian attack struck a U.S. target, not one belonging to a U.S. ally. The nature of the U.S. response will be closely scrutinized for evidence of U.S. resolve and credibility, but, unlike the other scenarios assessed here, it will not directly affect perceptions of U.S. commitment to Article 5 and U.S. alliance obligations more broadly. While the United States could choose to invoke Article 5 itself in response to the attack, this decision, as well as the other aspects of Move 2, could likely be approached with greater autonomy in Washington compared with the other scenarios we assessed.
- Because this was an attack on a U.S. target in retaliation for what Russia says were U.S. actions, the alliance cohesion concerns would also likely be more

limited, except insofar as the U.S. response might cause concern or dissension among allies.

Scenario C

Russia conducts coordinated daytime missile attacks at three air bases in Poland and Romania that are involved in arms shipments to Ukraine. Most of these attacks hit the bases, resulting in a dozen military casualties and some degradation of operations at these locations, although operations are largely restored within 48 hours. Some missiles miss these bases, however, and result in approximately a dozen civilian casualties in nearby areas. Russia issues a statement defending the strikes as a necessary response to NATO involvement in Ukrainian attacks on Russian territory. It calls for the end of NATO support to Ukraine and pointedly states that future attacks are possible if this support does not cease. This Move 1 would qualify as a focused attack on our intensity scale.

Key Considerations

- The scale of the attacks, and the casualties they have created, would likely require a kinetic response from the United States or NATO. Non-kinetic actions could also be part of the response but would not likely on their own be sufficient to satisfy concerns about Article 5 credibility or alliance cohesion.
- A clearly less-than-proportional kinetic response would pose similar, though smaller, risks for U.S. credibility, although U.S. policymakers could still pursue that option if they believed that the risks of Russian misidentification of a larger response as a

possible prelude to general war—a potential trigger for precipitous Russian escalation—were sufficiently high.

- Non-kinetic options that accompany U.S. or NATO kinetic responses could act as a “risk buffer” by modulating the overall perceived intensity of the response. For example, a less-than-proportional kinetic strike could be accompanied by more-intensive coercive non-kinetic actions if the United States desired to limit escalation risks while still imposing substantial costs on Russia to deter further attacks. Alternatively, a more-than-proportional kinetic strike could be accompanied by fewer coercive non-kinetic measures or even diplomatic engagement on issues related to Ukraine. The United States might have an interest in differentiating between the NATO-Russia-related and Ukraine war-related dimensions of the conflict, and seeking dialogue on the latter while responding harshly for the attack on the alliance could help it further that objective.
- That said, Russian attacks that generate NATO military and civilian casualties would likely limit the scope for diplomatic initiatives. Political pressures from affected countries in particular would be likely to drive stronger responses and create pressures for consensus on such options to preserve alliance cohesion.
- U.S. or NATO responses will, however, need to avoid creating the impression in Moscow that any U.S. or NATO kinetic or non-kinetic strikes could be a prelude to a larger-scale military campaign against Russia. To that end, the United States should

consider avoiding targeting command and control nodes, bomber bases, or early warning radars.

Scenario D

Russia conducts missile attacks on six key air and sea ports throughout Europe used by the U.S. military, including Ramstein Air Base and the port of Rotterdam. Although the military effects of the strikes are limited and most affected areas are able to resume at least limited operations within hours, there are roughly 200 military and civilian casualties, some apparently due to Russian targeting failures. Moscow announces that the attacks were undertaken in response to continued attacks on what it refers to as its own territory—including territory within Ukraine’s 1991 borders—using weapons and targeting information provided by NATO forces. Russia declares that it reserves the right to use all instruments of its military power to defend its sovereignty. This Move 1 would qualify as a less-restrained attack on our scale.

Key Considerations

- The range of plausible Move 2s to this Move 1 would be more limited given the combined concerns of alliance cohesion, domestic political pressures, and escalation risks.
- Ideally, a Move 2 would force Moscow, in contemplating Move 3, to believe that it is being forced to choose between losing a war to NATO (by escalating further) and losing a war to Ukraine (by giving up its efforts to coerce a change in NATO support for Ukraine). In other words, the sweet spot is to

raise the perceived cost of Move 3 (i.e., the U.S. or NATO response it might trigger) higher than the cost of losing in Ukraine. Creating this choice for Moscow would likely require both a robust kinetic Move 2 and a U.S. and NATO willingness to accept a certain level of escalation risks.

- It is difficult to conceive of diplomatic outreach that would address Russian concerns and would be feasible and desirable to implement under these circumstances.
- Article 5 credibility concerns would be increasingly important relative to other U.S. goals. What does preserving this credibility require in terms of proportionality? Does it require strikes inside Russia? Or does it require a similar amount of damage? Or both? U.S. policymakers will need to assess not only likely Russian perceptions of credibility in Move 2 but also Chinese and other potential future adversaries' perceptions as well.
- The political reactions across a now-wider range of directly affected NATO allies will also shape U.S. or NATO response options. Even individual states targeted by these attacks might differ in the types of responses that they demand the alliance take, and reconciling these into a consensus position would likely be a significant challenge.
- The presence of Russian forces outside Russia offers an alternative response option. Striking Russian forces in Ukraine—even areas that Moscow claims to be Russian territory—could reduce the escalation risks of striking sensitive military targets inside Russia, while signaling a desire to continue to confine hostilities to Ukraine. Even though the Russian

government would likely formally condemn the strikes as attacks on its territory, a U.S. statement that the strikes were deliberately targeted at forces outside Russia would be a signal of restraint. The political consequences for Moscow might be more limited as well, because the occupied areas have been attacked by Ukraine for months. However, such an approach could also signal a U.S. or NATO hesitancy to risk attacking Russian territory directly that could weaken the credibility of Article 5 in the minds of some U.S. adversaries or allies.

- The level of escalation that Russia has undertaken in these attacks would greatly enhance the tension between the U.S. desire to avoid further escalation and the imperative to continue allied support for Ukraine. Will U.S. and NATO policymakers continue to accept the risks of further escalation by refusing to address Russia's stated motivations for the attack? Or will they consider exploring trade-offs, either by continuing support for Ukraine while undertaking a less severe kinetic response

Striking Russian forces in Ukraine could reduce the escalation risks of striking sensitive military targets inside Russia.

or, conversely, by combining a more robust kinetic response with reductions in U.S. or NATO support for Ukraine?

- Unlike the Cuban Missile Crisis, when the removal of U.S. Jupiter missiles from Turkey was kept secret for decades, any concessions to Russia regarding U.S. policy toward Ukraine would likely be highly visible. Therefore, in addition to concerns about Article 5 specifically, changing U.S. policy toward Ukraine as part of a response would likely invoke broader credibility concerns for U.S. policymakers.
- The pronounced role of nuclear weapons in Russian doctrine highlights the importance of avoiding potential Russian nuclear tripwires in U.S. or NATO proportional responses that would inevitably involve strikes against militarily significant targets. Therefore, strikes against assets involved in command and control should be given the closest scrutiny.
- As in Scenario C, U.S. or NATO responses will need to avoid creating the impression in Moscow that any U.S. or NATO kinetic or non-kinetic strikes are a prelude to a larger-scale military campaign against Russia. To that end, the United States should consider avoiding targeting command and control nodes or early warning radars. But walking this line will be even harder in Scenario D given the larger scale and greater military effects of this Move 1.

Conclusions

Many of the insights that we identified for U.S. or NATO responses were specific to the circumstances of the particu-

lar Russian attack scenarios that we assessed, highlighting the contingent nature of such analysis. However, we also identified several insights with more-general applicability to U.S. defense planning:

- The intensity of Move 1 determines the range of options available to U.S. policymakers. Higher-intensity Russian attacks leave the United States fewer options that achieve its goals. A demonstrative Move 1 gives much more freedom of maneuver in choosing a Move 2 that achieves U.S. objectives.
- If Russia's motivation for its attack was to coerce a change in U.S. or NATO policy toward Ukraine, then the decision regarding whether to make any changes to this policy—or not—will need to be balanced by the other elements of a Move 2. Any Move 1 aimed at coercion is a deliberate raising of the stakes, essentially an attempt to make NATO choose between war with Russia and continuing its policies toward Ukraine. An ideal Move 2 would avoid an outright war with Russia while continuing those policies. But that might be challenging given the escalation risks involved.
- If U.S. policymakers decide not to change policy toward Ukraine, then the other aspects of Move 2 will need to communicate U.S. resolve to ensure that Russia does not believe it might succeed at changing U.S. policy at a higher level of escalation.
- If, on the other hand, U.S. policymakers do decide to change policy toward Ukraine in light of the Russian attack, then it will likely be essential to balance any such concessions by imposing costs on Russia to avoid perceptions in Moscow, Beijing, or allied capitals that future violent attempts to

The potential for nuclear use adds weight to the U.S. goal of avoiding further escalation, a goal which might seem increasingly critical in the aftermath of a limited Russian conventional attack.

coerce the United States can be on net beneficial. Developing a Move 2 that balances these concerns would be a substantial challenge.

- Russian strikes against targets in Ukraine have demonstrated a mixed record of accuracy. If these targeting challenges persist, it might be difficult to infer Russian intentions and motivations from the sites that were hit.
- Effectively determining the proportionality of Move 2 will be a challenge. There might not be clear analogs in Russia or Ukraine to the targets attacked in Move 1, the Law of Armed Conflict might prohibit similar attacks, or Russia and NATO might not view the same dimensions of proportionality (e.g., the scale of damage, the type of target, or the location of the target) as similarly important.

Making clear statements about the intent of Move 2 with regard to proportionality could be helpful, but ultimately Moscow's own perception of proportionality will drive its decisionmaking about possible Move 3s.

- This Perspective focuses on conventional attacks and responses. However, the potential for nuclear use in Move 3 and beyond is likely to be a critical consideration in responding to any Russian escalation against NATO, given the role of nuclear weapons in Russian doctrine and the level of desperation likely to be felt in Moscow in order for Russia to have undertaken an attack on NATO in the first place. The potential for nuclear use adds weight to the U.S. goal of avoiding further escalation, a goal which might seem increasingly critical in the aftermath of a limited Russian conventional attack.

Notes

¹ For an earlier RAND discussion of these issues, see Frederick et al., *Pathways to Russian Escalation Against NATO from the Ukraine War*.

² We do not consider Russian attacks that are limited to cyberspace.

³ We are referring to the intended target of a strike if Russian missiles hit something else instead.

⁴ As noted above, a full-scale Russian attack on NATO is outside the scope of this Perspective.

⁵ Russian strategy tends to call for any war with NATO, which this category of attack would likely constitute, to begin with an all-out attack to deny the alliance the opportunity to respond effectively. However, many Russian actions since the war in Ukraine began have not been consistent with Russia's stated military strategy, so we include this category for consideration nonetheless.

⁶ One potential Russian motivation appears increasingly implausible in the current context: a desire to expand the conflict to occupy or

control a NATO member state. Given Russian losses and exhaustion from the current war, the prospect that Moscow might choose the current moment as the time to embark on an additional war of aggression against a NATO member state appears remote.

⁷ While not the focus of this analysis, a Russian attack on NATO would likely create U.S. domestic political expectations for a response, although these expectations might vary widely depending on the nature of the Russian attack. The potential political costs of going against these expectations, in either a more or less aggressive direction, are likely to inform policymaker decisionmaking.

⁸ For readability, we use the terms *kinetic* and *military* interchangeably even though the military could be involved in non-kinetic steps as well.

⁹ The principle of proportionality has historically guided considerations regarding retaliatory military actions. It has a strong grounding in international law and tends to anchor both allied and adversary expectations of the intensity of responses.

Reference

Bryan Frederick, Samuel Charap, Scott Boston, Stephen J. Flanagan, Michael J. Mazarr, Jennifer D. P. Moroney, and Karl P. Mueller, *Pathways to Russian Escalation Against NATO from the Ukraine War*, RAND Corporation, PE-A1971-1, July 2022. As of October 24, 2022: <https://www.rand.org/pubs/perspectives/PEA1971-1.html>

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About This Perspective

This Perspective outlines a set of key considerations for U.S. policy-makers charged with planning U.S. responses to a potential limited Russian attack on European member states of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) or U.S. military assets or forces stationed there or in outer space. The authors consider four hypothetical Russian attack scenarios and describe in detail how U.S. or NATO responses to each might vary and how these responses might be shaped to pursue U.S. goals.

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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.

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.

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