

BROOKINGS

COMMENTARY

How credible is Russia's evolving nuclear doctrine?

Steven Pifer

November 14, 2024

Russia's doctrine for the use of nuclear weapons has gone through several evolutions over the past 15 years. Changes in 2010 and 2020 seemed relatively benign. In September 2024, Russian President Vladimir Putin announced additional modifications, which appear more meaningful.

These recent modifications were made while Western officials debated whether to allow Ukraine to use Western weapons to conduct strikes into Russian territory. They introduce ambiguity on when Russia might employ nuclear arms in a bid to persuade the West to stand down. But those modifications may well stretch Russian declaratory policy beyond the point of credibility.

Russian nuclear doctrine

Nuclear weapon states use doctrines to communicate policy on when they might use nuclear arms. According to the Biden administration's 2022 Nuclear Posture Review, "the fundamental role of [U.S.] nuclear weapons is to deter nuclear attack on the United States, our Allies, and partners. The United States would only consider the use of nuclear weapons in extreme circumstances to defend the vital interests of the United States or its Allies and partners."

The U.S. government does not define "extreme circumstances" beyond saying the adversary's attack would have a "strategic effect," leaving a degree of ambiguity.

Declaratory policy may not necessarily be the same as action policy—that is, what a state would really do in a crisis or conflict. In 1982, Soviet leader Leonid Brezhnev announced a policy of no first use of nuclear weapons. However, following the Soviet Union's collapse, revelations of Soviet war plans in Europe showed they envisaged the first use of nuclear weapons in a war with NATO. In any event, the decision to use nuclear arms would be one of the most consequential ever made; that decision would depend far more on the leader and the specific circumstances at the time rather than on a declared policy.

A relatively benign Russian doctrine

The Russian government released a new military doctrine in 2010. It was seen as narrowing the circumstances in which Russia might resort to nuclear weapons compared to the 2000 military doctrine. The 2010 document reserved the right to employ nuclear arms in two circumstances: "the utilization of nuclear or other types of weapons of mass destruction against [Russia] and (or) its allies" and "in the event of aggression against the Russian Federation involving the use of conventional weapons when the very existence of the state is under threat."

This appeared benign. It was difficult to see circumstances in which the three Western nuclear-weapon states—the United States, the United Kingdom, and France—would launch a first strike on Russia with nuclear or other weapons of mass destruction. As for a conventional assault that might threaten Russia's existence, Napoleon and Hitler demonstrated the folly of that.

In 2020, the Kremlin issued a document entitled "On Basic Principles of State Policy of the Russian Federation on Nuclear Deterrence." This document added two circumstances to those specified in 2010 for Russian nuclear use: the receipt of "reliable data on a launch of ballistic missiles attacking the territory of the Russian Federation and/or its allies," or an attack (presumably with conventional weapons) against "critical Russian governmental or military sites of the Russian Federation, disruption of which would undermine nuclear force response actions."

The first modification suggested a launch-on-warning policy, meaning Russia might launch its nuclear weapons before incoming missiles could arrive on target and destroy them. This likely referred to an attack by nuclear-armed intercontinental ballistic missiles and/or submarine-launched ballistic missiles, though it could also

have taken into account the U.S. Department of Defense's interest in 2019 in a ground-launched intermediate-range ballistic missile. (As noted in the 2022 Nuclear Posture Review, the U.S. military "maintains the capability to launch nuclear forces under conditions of an ongoing nuclear attack," but "it does not rely on a launch-under-attack policy.")

As for an attack on critical government or military facilities, that language mimicked language in the Trump administration's 2018 Nuclear Posture Review, which stated that the United States might consider using nuclear weapons in response to a "significant non-nuclear strategic attack" against "U.S. or allied nuclear forces, their command and control, or warning and attack assessment capabilities." This is not startling; it would seem logical that the United States and Russia would consider using nuclear forces if those forces or their command-and-control facilities came under significant attack by non-nuclear weapons.

September 2024 modifications to Russian doctrine

Facing the possibility of a broad Ukrainian counteroffensive in September 2022, Moscow rattled the nuclear saber and then quickly toned down its nuclear rhetoric. However, as the Russian military failed to make significant progress in 2023 and NATO members supplied Ukraine with increasingly sophisticated weapons, some Russian security experts suggested that Russia lower its threshold for nuclear use. Sergey Karaganov proposed limited nuclear strikes against Western Europe to reestablish the West's fear of Russia's nuclear deterrent. He downplayed the risk of almost certain nuclear retaliation, and his proposal was rejected by other Russian security experts as well as Putin.

Nevertheless, the idea of threatening nuclear use to dissuade the West from supporting Ukraine apparently took hold within the Kremlin. The Russian military has given greater visibility to exercises involving non-strategic (tactical) nuclear arms, most recently last spring. On September 25, 2024, Putin described further changes to Russian nuclear doctrine, though they were not as radical as experts such as Karaganov sought. First, Moscow would consider "aggression against Russia by any non-nuclear state, but with the participation or support of a nuclear state" as a "joint attack" on Russia. Second, Russia would consider using nuclear arms on "receipt of reliable information about a massive launch of air and space attack weapons and their crossing of our state border," to include an attack by "strategic and tactical aircraft, cruise missiles, drones, hypersonic and other aircraft." Third, Russia would reserve

"the right to use nuclear weapons in the event of aggression against Russia and Belarus as a member of the [Russia-Belarus] Union State," including an attack in which the adversary "using conventional weapons, creates a critical threat to our sovereignty."

The first point on "joint attack" aims to implicate NATO's three nuclear-weapon states in conventional attacks by Ukraine against Russian territory. The second point revises the 2020 modification regarding receipt of information of an attack with ballistic missiles to include attack by virtually any kind of aircraft, missile, or drone. It seems credible that a large-scale attack on Russian nuclear forces using air-delivered weapons, cruise missiles, and drones could trigger a Russian launch of nuclear weapons. Would Moscow resort to nuclear weapons in response to an attack with short-range ballistic missiles, cruise missiles, and/or drones focused on units in Russia supporting military operations in Ukraine? That seems nowhere near as credible.

The third point makes two modifications. First, the 2010 doctrine threatened nuclear use in the event of a conventional attack putting the existence of the Russian state at stake. The September 25 language covers Belarus, much as U.S. doctrine covers U.S. allies. Second, the third point changes the criterion for when Russia might use nuclear weapons from a conventional attack that puts Russia's existence "under threat" to one that "poses a critical threat" to Russian (or Belarusian) sovereignty. That formulation is ambiguous and undoubtedly intended to suggest a lowering of Russia's nuclear threshold. But what would constitute a critical threat to Russian sovereignty?

Real threat or bluff?

The latest changes to Russian nuclear doctrine introduce greater ambiguity, which the Kremlin undoubtedly hopes will give Western governments pause in decisions on providing weapons to Ukraine or lifting restrictions on their use. Vague Russian threats since 2022 apparently have slowed Western decisions about arming Ukraine but have not prevented those decisions. The kinds of weapons now provided—such as artillery, main battle tanks, ATACMS missile systems, and F-16 fighters—are far more sophisticated than the weapons provided to Ukraine prior to 2022.

The problem confronting the Kremlin is that the nearly 80-year existence of nuclear weapons suggests they are useful for deterring a nuclear attack and, possibly, a major conventional attack. Beyond that, their influence appears limited. The possession of a

large nuclear arsenal did not help the United States in Vietnam or the Soviet Union in Afghanistan.

Would Russia use nuclear weapons if its nuclear forces came under concerted Western attack? Almost certainly. Would Russia use nuclear weapons if Ukraine used U.S. ATACMS and British Storm Shadow missiles to strike military targets in Russia that were supporting Russian operations inside Ukraine? Moscow wants the West to think so. But such nuclear use would be fraught with political and military peril for Russia. Putin has accepted his ostracism from the West. Russian nuclear use against a non-nuclear weapon state would play badly in Beijing and New Delhi and likely make Putin a global pariah. Indeed, Putin suggests a lower nuclear threshold when his close partner China is again pressing for an agreement on no first use. More consequentially, using nuclear weapons would open a Pandora's box full of nasty, unpredictable, and potentially catastrophic consequences—including for Russia.

The Kremlin hopes the West will ignore all that and be dissuaded from further helping Ukraine. But Western governments can and should question whether the new elements of Russia's nuclear doctrine and implied nuclear threats have any real credibility.

AUTHOR



Steven Pifer Nonresident Senior Fellow - Foreign Policy, Center on the United States and Europe, Strobe Talbott Center for Security, Strategy, and Technology, Arms Control and Non-Proliferation Initiative
X @steven_pifer

Copyright 2024 The Brookings Institution