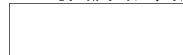


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Russian Postures and Policies on Nuclear Deterrence, First Use, and the Nuclear Threshold: Balancing on a Tightrope

Russian leaders are walking a difficult tightrope in seeking to make a policy of broadened nuclear deterrence credible while avoiding inflammatory statements that suggest a drastically lowered nuclear threshold. The range of official and semiofficial views expressed on what could trigger Russian first use of nuclear weapons offers insights that go beyond the brief and deliberately vague statements contained in the National Security Concept and the draft of the new military doctrine, indicating lack of agreement in Moscow over where the nuclear threshold should be. Changes in phrasing from earlier editions of these documents probably do not embody shifts in policies on nuclear use and the nuclear threshold, but reflect heightened threat perceptions and a desire to employ tougher language to counter what is seen as a greater likelihood of aggression against Russia. 

Official statements of Russian defense policy, such as the recently adopted National Security Concept and new military doctrine provisionally approved on 4 February, seek to avoid unambiguous statements of the circumstances under which Moscow might use nuclear weapons first, but at the same time invoke Russia's right to use nuclear weapons if its survival and territorial integrity are threatened (see Appendix). Moscow has relied on a broadened concept of nuclear deterrence since 1992, invoking its nuclear arsenal to ward off potential threats of nuclear and large-scale conventional aggression. Adoption of this broadened concept required abandonment of the Soviet-era pledge never to be the first to use nuclear weapons and formulation of policies covering when nuclear initiation might be justified and options for limited nuclear first use. 

This in turn has created a tension between making such broadened deterrence credible by asserting Russia's "right" to use nuclear weapons in response to aggression employing purely conventional means, while forgoing alarmist language that suggests a reckless approach to first use of nuclear weapons. The differences in the treatment of this issue in the January 2000 version of the National Security Concept in comparison with its December 1997 predecessor—and in the October 1999 and February 2000 drafts of the new military doctrine in contrast with 

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the November 1993 "Basic Provisions of Military Doctrine" *—probably do not in themselves embody shifts in underlying policies regarding nuclear use and the nuclear threshold. Rather, they reflect heightened threat perceptions and a desire to employ tougher language to counter what is seen as a greater likelihood of aggression.* [redacted]

The difficulty of finding the right balance between employing tough language while maintaining an image of responsibility is well illustrated by former President Yeltsin's outburst, during a visit to China, about Russia's possession of a "full nuclear arsenal." Such statements gain public attention but cause alarm and compel other officials—including then Premier Putin—to "clean up" after him and provide more moderate language. Colonel General Manilov, First Deputy Chief of the General Staff and a frequent spokesman on military doctrine, has similarly backtracked on the circumstances of, and reasons for, potential Russian nuclear first use to make Moscow's policies appear more benign and less threatening.

- Responding to media charges that the National Security Concept and new military doctrine had lowered Russia's nuclear threshold, Manilov in mid-January claimed that Moscow would use such weapons only "to save Russia from destruction and the Russian people from enslavement."

[redacted]

Manilov has also repeatedly insisted that Russia would use nuclear weapons only for defensive purposes and only if it is attacked.

- In an October 1999 press conference, for example, he asserted that "nuclear weapons will never be used against anybody but an aggressor. If there is no aggression against Russia and its allies, this means that nuclear weapons are not going to be used."

Lack of Consensus About Russia's Nuclear Threshold [redacted]

Pressures have grown over the last several years to lower Russia's nuclear threshold to encompass potential regional as well as large-scale aggression; to threaten use of nuclear weapons early in a conflict, rather than delay until defeat is imminent; and to use demonstrative nuclear strikes to "de-escalate" a conflict by forcing an attacker to back off. The nuclear threshold issue is complicated by public disagreements between those who believe Russia has no choice but to rely heavily on nuclear deterrence—and concomitant potential nuclear initiation—

[redacted]

versus those who argue that Russia is relying far too heavily on its nuclear arsenal and that greater attention must be paid to restoring its conventional capabilities.

- In a series of interviews marking the 40th anniversary of the Strategic Rocket Forces (SRF) in December, SRF Commander Yakovlev said deterioration of the general purpose forces “compelled Russia to reduce the threshold for the use of nuclear weapons and to extend nuclear deterrence to conflicts of a lesser scale and to openly warn about that.”
- The unofficial but influential Russian Council on Foreign and Defense Policy (CFDP) first publicly advocated such limited first nuclear use to “de-escalate” regional conflicts in early 1997. In an April 1999 statement—signed by several top military leaders who played key roles in the formulation of military doctrine—the CFDP also called for “early and limited” use of nuclear weapons if Russia were attacked by superior conventional forces.
- The most prominent critic of excessive reliance on nuclear weapons, General Gareyev, the President of the Academy of Military Sciences, warned in an October commentary on the draft nuclear doctrine that Russia “should not copy NATO precepts” because competition “not to delay” in using nuclear weapons “will constantly encourage the use of nuclear weapons and could lead to catastrophic consequences.”

The question of when and how Russia might use nuclear weapons first is further complicated by bureaucratic rivalries between advocates of strategic versus non-strategic weapons.

- Partisans of tactical and other nonstrategic nuclear weapons claim that they can be employed at lower nuclear thresholds than their strategic counterparts, with less risk of escalation to a massive, catastrophic strategic nuclear exchange.
- [redacted] strategic nuclear forces could be used to counter a wide array of nonnuclear threats by threatening “surgical” strikes using both highly accurate super-low-yield nuclear weapons and—potentially—conventionally armed strategic delivery systems. [redacted]

Deliberate Ambiguity in Nuclear Use Posture [redacted]

While internal debates continue over Russian dependency on nuclear weapons and over what types of weapons to emphasize, disagreements also exist between proponents of ambiguity in describing Russia's nuclear threshold and those who favor an explicit "line in the sand."

- An article on nuclear deterrence theory in a mid-1999 issue of the General Staff journal *Military Thought* noted the advantages of "vagueness" in portraying Russia's nuclear threshold, since this could force potential foes to act more cautiously.
- By contrast, an October 1998 article in another military journal argued for "a special federal law" that would "precisely spell out conditions" under which Russia would use nuclear weapons first, to stiffen the political leadership's "political will and resolve." [redacted]

Use of phraseology from the "negative security assurances" associated with the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) has created additional confusion over the circumstances of possible Russian nuclear initiation. Russia had changed the phrasing of its NPT negative security assurances in the summer of 1993 to parallel language employed by the three NATO nuclear powers, probably with the intention of using this new language in a public statement of military doctrine in place of the abandoned no-first-use pledge.

- The 1993 "Basic Provisions" document thus stated that Russia guaranteed that it would not employ nuclear weapons against any NPT signatory that did not possess nuclear weapons, except if such a state, in formal alliance with a nuclear power, or in joint actions with such a power, participated in an attack on Russia or its allies.
- The October 1999 draft military doctrine largely repeats the pledge that Russia will not use nuclear weapons against nonnuclear signatories of the NPT, provided that they do not participate in aggression—together with a nuclear power—against Russia or its allies. [redacted]

This language is almost certainly intended to put a palatable coating on Moscow's acknowledgment of the possibility of using nuclear weapons first. It has been mistakenly interpreted, however, as a threat to use nuclear weapons against any ally of a nuclear power that engages in an armed conflict with Russia, regardless of the circumstances. [redacted]

Inherent Uncertainty about the Russian Nuclear Threshold [redacted]

Russian military planners who wrestle most with the possibility of nuclear war—and even more so, senior political leaders who would have to make the decision whether or not to employ nuclear weapons—are unlikely to be certain in the abstract exactly where they would draw the line, were Russia attacked. The stiffening of Russia’s public posture in the wake of NATO airstrikes against Yugoslavia in 1999—reflected in the National Security Concept and the military doctrine—has been expressed in tougher language about external threats and Russia’s resolve to counter them.

- To reinforce this shift, alterations were made to a long-planned major military exercise, Zapad-99, to demonstrate Russian readiness to employ nuclear weapons first if it faced defeat at the conventional level, in a war scenario apparently modeled after the recent NATO air campaign. For the first time in a decade, strategic bombers conducted notional nuclear-armed cruise missile strikes after approaching Great Britain and Iceland.
- In a similar exercise three months later, Russian bombers approached northern Canada and Alaska in a demonstration of their ability to hit North American targets.
- The bombers’ message was backed up by an unprecedented acknowledgment by Defense Minister Sergeyev that Russia had resorted to first use of nuclear weapons because it could not stop the notional “Western” attack. [redacted]

Moscow thus has clearly meant to convey that its nuclear threshold would be crossed by a massive conventional air attack that threatened its military, economic, and political infrastructure. But whether Russia would respond with nuclear use to a much lower level attack—as some hardliners in and outside the military would like potential foes to believe—remains uncertain. [redacted]



Appendix

Official Statements on Nuclear Use and the Russian Nuclear Threshold



January 2000 National Security Concept



The Russian Federation considers the possibility of employing military forces to ensure its national security based on the following principles: use of all forces and assets, including nuclear weapons, at Russia's disposal in case of a need to repel armed aggression, if all other measures of resolving the crisis situation have been exhausted and have proven ineffective.



December 1997 National Security Concept



Russia reserves the right to use all the forces and assets at its disposal, including nuclear weapons, if the unleashing of armed aggression results in a threat to the actual existence of the Russian Federation as an independent state.



February 2000 provisional Military Doctrine



Russia is entitled to use nuclear weapons exclusively in the event of aggression against it or its allies and only when it is impossible by conventional means to prevent the elimination of Russia as a component of international relations and as a sovereign entity in those relations.



October 1999 draft Military Doctrine



Russia retains the right to use nuclear weapons in response to the use of nuclear and other kinds of weapons of mass destruction and to wide-scale aggression using conventional weapons in situations critical to the national security of Russia and its allies.



November 1993 Basic Provisions of Military Doctrine



Deliberate actions of an aggressor aimed at destruction or disruption of strategic nuclear forces, missile attack warning systems, facilities of nuclear power, atomic, and chemical industries, increase the danger of conventional war escalating into nuclear war.

