Moscow's Nuclear Enigma

What Is Russia's Arsenal Really For?

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Talk to anybody in Washington (except, perhaps, the U.S. president), and you will hear an ominous mantra: the Russians are back. Moscow, resurgent, is sowing discord among Western states and trying to reestablish its sphere of influence in former Soviet countries and beyond. One development, in particular, has caused much hyperventilating in Western ministries and think tanks: the Russian Federation not only has more nuclear weapons than any other country in the world but also is investing in an arsenal of modern, low-yield nuclear weapons that could be used for limited nuclear warfare.

These investments have many analysts worried that Russia would be the first to pull the nuclear trigger in a future war, and that it would do so early on, hoping to quickly bomb its adversary into submission and end the conflict—a strategy dubbed "escalate to de-escalate." If military confrontation of any kind might push Moscow to go nuclear, preparing for war with Russia means preparing for a potential nuclear war. The United States, the thinking goes, can only defend itself and its allies by modernizing its own nuclear arsenal. Above all, Washington should develop more low-yield nuclear weapons for use on the battlefield or risk being outgunned in a future war.

But those who fret about the Russian arsenal misread the Kremlin's intentions and put forward the wrong solutions. The real danger is not a new and more aggressive Russian nuclear strategy; it is the Kremlin's failure to communicate its goals effectively to leaders in Washington and elsewhere. Russia's actual strategy has not diverged much from plain old-fashioned deterrence: Russia believes that any major war with the United States could result in a massive U.S. nuclear attack, and so it maintains a nuclear arsenal of its own in order to discourage such an attack. But its policy of deliberate ambiguity is feeding into apprehension in Washington, driving a dangerous cycle of escalation that is bound to worsen suspicions and heighten the risk that clashes will escalate.

MOVING UP THE LADDER

The Soviet Union became a nuclear power in 1949, just four years after the United States did, kicking off a dizzying arms race. For decades, each country feared that the other might develop a nuclear advantage, be it technological or numerical, that would enable it to deliver a single, lethal blow and wipe out its opponent. As a result, simply possessing nuclear weapons was not enough; each side sought parity with or—better yet—dominance over the other. As part of these efforts, the two sides built both strategic weapons, many hundreds of times as powerful as the bombs dropped on Japan in World War II, and lower-yield, shorter-range tactical nuclear weapons. Strategists argued that these tactical weapons could be used to wage a limited and

controlled nuclear war, invoking an "escalation ladder," with many rungs on the climb up toward all-out annihilation.

But as arsenals grew large enough to wipe out humankind several times over, cooler heads began to prevail. Starting in 1972, a series of arms control agreements between Moscow and Washington enabled each side to reduce the size of its arsenal and eliminate weapons systems that the other found provocative. In a 1982 speech at the United Nations, Soviet Premier Leonid Brezhnev even announced that the Soviet Union would never be the first to use nuclear weapons in a war. At the time, much of the U.S. national security establishment dismissed this announcement as disingenuous propaganda. Yet many Russian analysts, including those in senior roles at the time, argue that in the final stretch of the Cold War, the Soviet playbook was, indeed, to go nuclear only after receiving warning of an incoming nuclear attack by the United States.

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The collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 brought new challenges to the nuclear relationship. On the one hand, with the Cold War over, both sides strengthened their commitment to arms reduction and drastically cut their arsenals. Even today, as Russia and the United States are modernizing their nuclear programs and developing new capabilities, both countries are complying with the 2010 New START treaty, which bars them from deploying more than 1,550 strategic warheads each.

On the other hand, post-Soviet Russia's nuclear strategy seemed more trigger-happy than before. In 1993, it dropped Brezhnev's "no first use" pledge, citing the weakness of its conventional military as a reason to use its nuclear arsenal as a fallback against a broader range of threats. A 1999 article by a group of Russian military analysts outlined how this might work: it argued that Russia should consider using nuclear weapons in future regional conflicts to signal its resolve and thus convince its adversaries to back down—that it should, in today's nuclear lingo, "escalate to de-escalate." The following year, Russia updated its military doctrine to permit nuclear escalation against conventional enemy forces "in situations deemed critical to the national security of the Russian Federation."

MOSCOW MISREAD

For many Western analysts, this escalatory strategy is still—or perhaps once again—the essence of Russian nuclear strategy. The Pentagon's 2018 Nuclear Posture Review makes this assumption explicit, arguing that the United States must prepare for "limited nuclear first use" by Moscow in any potential confrontation.

The Pentagon's assessment, however, ignores Russia's actual strategy. In 2010, Russia contradicted the expectations of many experts and of some of its own officials when, instead of lowering the bar for nuclear use, it raised it. That year, it released a new military doctrine that made clear that Russia would use nuclear weapons under just two circumstances: either in response to an attack with weapons of mass destruction, nuclear or otherwise, or in the face of a conventional offensive threatening the "very existence of the state." Russia's most recent doctrine, issued in 2014, reaffirmed this language. It also emphasized the need to develop "nonnuclear" deterrence—a capacity to prevent attacks without having to threaten nuclear war.

Taken at face value, this posture is a far cry from the aggressive mindset that many Washington policymakers consider to be the core of Russia's playbook. The country's long-range ballistic missiles clearly exist first and foremost to deter a U.S. nuclear attack, just as they did in Soviet times. In the event of a war, Russia expects that the United States will unleash massive barrages of airpower to take out Russian defenses. Because the United States' nuclear strategy emphasizes the importance of quickly disabling enemy capabilities, Russian strategists also believe that the United States would seek to eliminate Russia's nuclear arsenal at the outset, using its own conventional or nuclear strategic weapons to do so. Just as the Soviet Union planned to do before it, Russia is therefore likely to launch its most vulnerable nuclear weapons systems as soon as it receives warning of an incoming U.S. attack, lest its ability to retaliate be destroyed. This posture may sound disconcerting, but it puts the bar for escalation relatively high, in line with Russian military doctrine.

Why, then, have so many U.S. and Western analysts come to a much darker conclusion about Russia's nuclear intentions? Much of the answer lies in the way Russia has developed its nuclear arsenal in recent years. Arms control treaties have capped the number of deployed strategic warheads, but they place no limits on shorter-range, lower-yield capabilities. By a conservative estimate, Russia now has 2,000 of these tactical nuclear weapons stockpiled, whereas the United States has only a few hundred. Moreover, Russia has been modernizing its tactical inventory, developing weapons systems such as the Iskander missile launcher and the Kalibr cruise missile, both of which can be armed with nuclear warheads, although they are currently being used as conventional systems.

The development of these weapons systems may seem at odds with Russia's stated strategy. In the 1950s and 1960s, tactical nuclear weapons were conceived for active warfare; their purpose was not so much to deter conflict as to help defeat or intimidate an adversary when the shooting had already begun. Many analysts believe that the same holds true today, arguing that there is no good reason for a country to maintain, let alone modernize, a large arsenal of nonstrategic nuclear weapons unless it plans on using them on the battlefield. These analysts also point out that Russian military exercises often incorporate Iskander and Kalibr weapons systems, thus suggesting that Russia will escalate a conflict by launching low-yield nuclear weapons against its enemy. But the assumption that Russian weapons systems are built for this purpose does not hold up. Because these new weapons systems can deliver both conventional and nuclear warheads, one could just as easily argue that the exercises involving them are merely rehearsals for a conventional war.

Some analysts argue that recent changes to Moscow's military doctrine signal a shift toward the "escalate to de-escalate" strategy. Specifically, they point to Russia's 2017 naval doctrine, where one convoluted sentence notes that being ready and willing to use nonstrategic nuclear weapons in an escalating conflict can successfully deter an enemy. At first glance, this looks like an explicit threat to cross the nuclear threshold. Yet analysts may be reading too much into the text. The clear-cut reference to escalation is noteworthy, but the naval doctrine does not state that Russia would be the first to cross that threshold. As such, the line does not necessarily clash with the more restrained approach to deterrence outlined in other Russian documents.

Moreover, if "escalate to de-escalate" were Russia's new guiding strategy, it would be odd for this shift away from the 2014 position to be tucked away inside a tangled passage of its naval doctrine. If Moscow sought to strengthen its deterrence

capabilities by lowering the bar for nuclear use, one would expect it to broadcast this change loud and clear. It might, for instance, make a public announcement that from now on, Russia would use nuclear weapons whenever it deemed it necessary. By contrast, a muted announcement would risk making an adversary more sanguine about the probable costs of war, encouraging, rather than deterring, an attack.

Western analysts accusing Russia of nuclear brinkmanship misread its public statements. Granted, lower-level Russian officials and pundits have made rather liberal use of hyperbole in their nuclear threats against NATO members and other countries. It is also true that new nuclear-capable weapons systems are a point of pride for the country. In a speech to parliament in March, for example, Russian President Vladimir Putin emphasized the country's nuclear modernization efforts and its new, exotic weapons. But in the same speech, Putin explained that Russia's newest strategic weapons could overcome U.S. missile defenses, a capacity that would be relevant only if Russia were retaliating, not attacking. Putin later affirmed that Russia would use nuclear weapons only if a U.S. attack were imminent or had already occurred—further confirming that Russia's arsenal is for deterrence, not escalation.

NUCLEAR MIND GAMES

Even though the evidence suggests that Russia does not have a strategy of using nuclear weapons early on in a conventional conflict, there's a reason this view has become predominant among outside observers. The Russian government has refused to clearly explain the exact purpose of its tactical nuclear weapons—a deliberate ambiguity that is probably intended to increase deterrence but in fact only heightens the risks of escalation.

Until about a decade ago, Russia's stocks of nonstrategic nuclear weapons and dual-use systems had largely fallen by the wayside. It was only after Western analysts noted the nuclear capabilities of Iskander missile launchers that Russian rhetoric began emphasizing such capabilities. This suggests that Russia may value the nuclear element of these systems because they make its adversaries nervous. There is little reason to have a stated policy that precludes going nuclear if one in fact plans to use nuclear weapons, but there is a logic to a nuclear strategy that keeps an adversary guessing. Moscow may be using its nonstrategic capabilities to plant seeds of doubt in the minds of the United States and its allies. If this leads to a more cautious U.S. policy toward Russia, then Russia has strengthened its deterrent. Moscow's nuclear strategy may owe something to the national security scholar Thomas Schelling's concept of "the threat that leaves something to chance": if you can convince your adversaries that the worst-case scenario, however unlikely, is at all possible, they will think twice about attacking you.

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But a strategy of ambiguity is not one of "escalate to de-escalate." After all, the premise of the latter is that the Kremlin thinks a confrontation with the United States—even a nuclear one—could stay limited and that limited nuclear escalation in such a scenario would play out in Russia's favor. Yet most Russian strategists do not believe that such a conflict would ever be limited in scope: having studied how the

Pentagon fights its wars, they expect that a military clash with the United States would almost certainly lead to, if not begin with, a large-scale attack on Russia, including an early strike on its nuclear capabilities. If Russia thought such an attack was imminent or under way, it would certainly consider going nuclear. For Moscow, this is fully in line with its doctrine.

The bottom line is that Russian leaders see a possible conflict with the United States not as a limited skirmish but as the prelude to the potential destruction of their country—what Putin has called "a world without Russia." To prevent this from happening, the Kremlin retains the capabilities needed to wage an earth-destroying retaliatory campaign. Against this background, Russia may indeed be developing tactical nuclear weapons and dual-use systems. Yet these are not part of a plan to escalate and quickly win a war. They are meant to send a strong signal to the United States about the dangers of starting one in the first place.

KEEP CALM

This ambiguity is backfiring. Russia's emphasis on dual-capable weapons may be intended to strengthen deterrence, but it undermines it in practice. Rather than deterring the United States, this ambiguity has led U.S. policymakers to interpret Russian posturing and rhetoric as a lowered bar for the use of nuclear weapons in any kind of conflict. And since Pentagon officials view any ability by Russia to change their decision-making calculus as a threat in and of itself, their response has not been to back off and reduce tensions; it has been to consider developing more low-yield nuclear weapons of their own, as discussed in the Pentagon's most recent Nuclear Posture Review. If Russia wants to reduce the risk of nuclear war, it needs to make its doctrine clearer and ensure that the weapons it deploys match that doctrine.

Russia's policy of strategic ambiguity is backfiring.

The United States, meanwhile, should be careful not to overreact in the face of Russian posturing. The prevailing view in the Trump administration is that if Russia is developing tactical nuclear weapons, the United States must show that it is willing to do the same. But the underlying logic that smaller nuclear weapons mean that a nuclear war could be controlled is deeply flawed and dangerous. As long as one or both sides in such a conflict feel that their survival is at stake—which Russia would certainly assume—a U.S. playbook that relies more and more on nuclear weapons, no matter how low yield, would have disastrous consequences.

If the United States truly wants to avoid the worst, it should work to ensure that any future clashes with Russia stay out of the nuclear realm altogether. To do this, it must emphasize, through its force posture, planning, and stated policy, those capabilities that have long made Russia jittery: American advanced conventional systems. This is because, contrary to hawkish narratives in Washington, Russia fears the consequences of crossing the nuclear threshold and is therefore unlikely to take that step in any but the most extreme of circumstances. Greater U.S. emphasis on conventional weapons would not eliminate the possibility that Russia might launch a nuclear weapon if it believed itself to be under attack, whether with conventional or nuclear weapons. It would, however, help deter any aggressive Russian action in eastern Europe or elsewhere, thus addressing one of the biggest fears among NATO member states. And it would shift Russian incentives and encourage Moscow to focus on strengthening its own conventional capabilities, creating more nonnuclear rungs on the escalation ladder.

The more the United States highlights nuclear weapons in its posture, planning, and rhetoric, on the other hand, the more Russia will come to rely on them as crucial defensive and coercive tools. Blurring the lines between conventional and nuclear warfare may serve the purpose of deterrence if all parties involved understand one another's reasoning and signals, or interpret them as threatening the very worst, but both Moscow and Washington fall short on the first, and on the second, Moscow's posture is proving counterproductive. Unless policymakers on both sides come to understand this, they are following a path that could lead to unthinkable consequences.