

STRATEGIC TRENDS RESEARCH INITIATIVE

NUCLEAR STABILITY AND ESCALATION RISKS IN EUROPE

Eurasia Program, Foreign Policy Research Institute

HDTRA122P0035 | July 2023

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CLASSIFICATION – DISTRO STATEMENT

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INTRODUCTION

The security situation in Europe has changed dramatically following Russia's invasion of Ukraine and President Vladimir Putin's repeated threats to use nuclear weapons if the conflict were to escalate.

The Foreign Policy Research Institute convened a Track 2 dialogue with European and American representatives to discuss the future of security in Europe, the role of nuclear weapons in guaranteeing Allied safety, and potential escalation pathways between Russia and the North Atlantic Treaty Alliance (NATO).

During the dialogue, participants looked into the near future in a potential context where Russian forces may retain a foothold in Ukraine and NATO may continue to militarily support the government in Kyiv. The objective was to understand how countries view the same problem set so that FPRI can help identify areas of convergence and disagreement, which can lead to actionable recommendations about how to improve deterrence in Europe.

FINDINGS SUMMARY

Over two days of discussion among experts on these topics, consisting of five panels followed by a wrap-up session, several key conclusions emerged. These can be summarized as follows:

- From the outset of the conflict, Russian President Vladimir Putin has used nuclear weapons to manage escalation with the United States and NATO — and to deter direct external involvement in the war. Russian nuclear threats have been effective in this regard, deterring earlier and more robust Western support of Ukraine.
- The United States and NATO have responded with less overt nuclear signaling, and both sides appear to understand the other's "red lines," locking the two sides into a deterrent relationship. Though this suggests that the greatest risk of escalation has passed, the risk is not negligible. Russia might still be incentivized to nuclear use by a rapid collapse of Russian forces in Ukraine.
- The war has revealed shortcomings in nuclear literacy —defined as an understanding of the role of nuclear weapons in deterring war and managing escalation within a war— amongst Western publics, which increases the likelihood of opposition to US and NATO support for the Ukrainian war effort.
- Looking forward, Russia may turn to nuclear weapons to offset its conventional weakness.
- Russia will seek ways to make its deterrent threats more credible; some of these are likely to raise the risk of Russian nuclear use and exacerbate the nuclear literacy issue discussed above.
- The United States and its allies are likely entering an era of nuclear proliferation, enabled by the collapse of the nuclear arms control regime, incentivized by developments in the war in Ukraine.
- The conversation reveals that European thinking on the role of nuclear weapons is changing, with more countries seeing nuclear weapons as critical to deterring Russia and seeking extended deterrence from the United States. At the same time, there is a mismatch between US thinking and that of some European countries on responsibilities for conventional deterrence.

METHODOLOGY

FPRI convened a Track 2 dialogue with European and American representatives in Brussels, Belgium, on March 6-7, 2023, to address nuclear stability and escalation risks in Europe.

Participants included former government and non-government subject matter experts—ranging from European security to nuclear strategy—from the United States, Sweden, Finland, Germany, Poland, France, Latvia, and the United Kingdom.

The dialogue was comprised of six panel discussions on the following topics: (1) Russian nuclear doctrine and escalation risks in Europe; (2) alliance concerns in responding to Russian nuclear coercion; (3) European views on nuclear sharing and nuclear deterrence; (4) the evolution of Russia's conventional forces and nuclear policy after the war in Ukraine; (5) European defense investment and conventional defense; and (6) reflections and closing commentary on the prior discussions.

Moderators from each panel began with a short introduction of the topic, followed by a presentation by each panelist. The session then shifted to a moderated open discussion.

The dialogue operated under the Chatham House Rule, which allows participants to use information from the dialogue but does not permit identifying the individual who made particular comments.

The dialogue was designed to convene experts from varying disciplines and countries to evaluate the nuclear threat landscape in the near- to medium-term as the war in Ukraine continues and to gain an understanding of the future of nuclear nonproliferation in Europe.

ANALYSIS

RUSSIAN NUCLEAR DOCTRINE AND ESCALATION RISKS IN EUROPE

Russian Nuclear Doctrine

Participants agreed that Russia's invasion of Ukraine has dramatically altered the global security environment. They assessed that the entirety of Europe remains committed to supporting Ukraine. The panelists—and the discussants in the ensuing conversations—from both the United States and Europe underscored the need to rethink the risk of nuclear conflict, better understand Russian nuclear doctrine and signaling, and take steps to come to a consensus about how to deter nuclear and conventional war. The correct steps to take, however, were subject to debate.

Russian nuclear doctrine can be defined by two approaches: 1) deterrence by intimidation and inducement and 2) deterrence by the limited use of force, beginning with conventional means of reprisal and escalating to limited nuclear weapons use. This approach is based on the belief that limited nuclear use can be effective at 1) restraining escalation to strategic nuclear use, 2) deterring other countries from intervening in the war, 3) deterring vertical escalation, and 4) achieving war termination on acceptable terms by escalating the conflict and then lobbying for a solution on favorable terms—under the threat of further nuclear escalation.

The calculation is as much about the actual psychological damage a threatened nuclear strike causes as about its potential physical damage. Over time, this can be understood through the concept of deterrent damage, which means damage can be applied specifically to a target. These options can be divided into 1) those that primarily shape local military decision-making and 2) those that shape public perceptions. So far, the war in Ukraine shows that when it comes to deterrence by intimidation and fear inducement, the Russian approach has been successful.

Russia's threat of nuclear escalation has limited the timing of US and Western assistance to Ukraine and the ranges and types of weapons that Western nations are willing to provide. The threat of Russian nuclear use has led Western policymakers to be cautious about providing weapons that can strike deep into Russian

territory, lest they risk crossing Russian red lines. However, as the conflict has continued, Russian nuclear signaling has become less credible, and the West has provided weapons that it once considered taboo to Ukraine. The counterargument can be made that the United States has done a much better job pursuing its local objectives under the restraint imposed by Russian nuclear threats and, overall, has the better end of the deal – is more capable of de-escalation. The risk here is that Russia may feel a need to demonstrate its resolve to deter the delivery of more capable weapons to Ukraine.

Russia's strategic arsenal is meant to deter existential threats, and its possible use in a regional war to control escalation is important to understand. Russian doctrine tries to make clear—while remaining ambiguous—the limits of what Russia sees as existential. We are not supposed to know where the red lines are drawn.

There was some discussion among participants about whether Russia's military shortcomings stem from weaknesses in Russian military doctrine or in how its forces executed combat operations. Some discussants argued it was both: Russia's inability to achieve its goals through conventional means shows inherent weakness in the political and military systems.

Conceptually, the war has demonstrated that the Russian military and political leadership make assumptions about the efficacy and impact of conventional military force. Russian forces were ill-prepared for combat. Russia's political leadership was also prone to war optimism that stilted their own understanding of the efficacy of military force—and Ukraine's commitment to resist. At the tactical level, the Russian military suffered from a lack of realistic training and poor decisions by the political leadership. Russia has a military designed to call up mobilized personnel to fight large-scale combat. Russian leaders did not call up these personnel at the outset of the war. As a result, the first weeks of the conflict severely tested the Russian military and chewed up elite units that were ill-prepared for a large-scale war in Europe. While the Russian approach improved by the fall of 2022, by that point, they had already misspent a large portion of their conventional arsenal. As the Russian military faltered, the prospect of Russian military defeat loomed, raising questions about whether such a defeat could lead to Russian nuclear use in an attempt to settle the conflict on more favorable terms.

Participants generally agreed that to properly evaluate Russian nuclear doctrine, it was important to speculate why Russia has not yet used nuclear weapons in Ukraine. Participants identified five core reasons why Russia has not yet resorted to nuclear use:

1. Russia does not want war with NATO, and NATO does not want war with Russia, and Russia is deterred from escalation by NATO/US nuclear weapons.
2. The nuclear taboo: Breaking the nuclear taboo would lead to increased proliferation, which Russia has worked hard to resist and undermines key Russian objectives. As soon as Russia goes down this path, there is no sensible response from any other country but to develop its own nuclear weapons as rapidly as possible. That goes against the longstanding Russian priority of avoiding proliferation—not just because of the resulting instability but also because it undermines the status to which Russia clings.
3. Territory: Russia wants Ukraine's land and assets; therefore, destroying both through the use of nuclear weapons is counterproductive.
4. Great power status: Russia has not used nuclear weapons because they do not feel they have to. Leaders of great powers think differently than leaders of small powers. They think war is a contest of will that they have the resources, the population, the defense, and the industrial base to overcome. They cherry-pick what they like from history to rationalize their success. One of the big elements of status for Russia is the role they see themselves playing in managing international security as the

principal peer nuclear weapons state to the United States. Using nuclear weapons would undermine this status.

5. It shows weakness: Resorting to nuclear weapons is a de facto admission that Russia was unable to achieve its goals through conventional military means.

Escalation Risks

The panel discussion examined the near-term risks of nuclear escalation in Europe. Participants agreed that the highest risk of nuclear escalation was in the early stages of the war in 2022. One participant stressed that wars are fundamentally unstable, and the opposing parties in war shape each other's overall perceptions about the inherent level of general stability and instability of the conflict. It is more valuable to evaluate how leaders see stability in the system and their comfort level with it rather than Russian red lines or thresholds. The greater the stability they perceive, the more risk they are willing to take.

The discussion mentioned the war scare of 1983 during the Able Archer exercise and its relevance for today. In 1983, the Soviet Union convinced itself that the United States was planning a pre-emptive nuclear strike and moved its nuclear forces to a higher alert level. Soviet nuclear planners considered this a necessary step to be able to respond immediately to any overt sign of a US launch with a nuclear strike of their own. Today, Russia assesses the potential for a US nuclear strike as very low and has developed other strategic capabilities that give it more response options.

Most participants were cautiously optimistic and agreed that the current risk of Russian nuclear escalation was low, with the caveat that this estimation was conditions-based. There are no conditions at the moment under which nuclear use would make the situation better for Russia. Furthermore, participants argued that Russia has all of the other means of escalation that it has been working extremely hard to develop over the past 20 years. There would have to be more options exhausted, and the entire chain of command would have to be convinced that this was the final step.

Participants identified potential conditions that could prompt Russia's leadership to use nuclear weapons:

1. A military collapse of Russian forces as a result of a defeat led by a loss of cohesion of forces in the military theater. More risk is involved if there is a time constraint in which Russian forces are faced with potential defeat and collapse, and the local leadership must decide what to do with the military options presented to them while feeling time pressure to make a decision without all the best information. That is the worst scenario.
2. Nuclear use becomes more likely when Russia perceives a crisis, and its decision-making is under time pressure. In that case, nuclear weapons are a more attractive option because they represent the most obvious available military option to avoid immediate defeat.

European participants pointed out that Russia has many forms of escalation beyond nuclear that it has deployed and may deploy to achieve its objectives, including:

1. Cyberattacks;
2. Attacks on critical infrastructure;
3. Attacks on satellites, cables, pipelines.

There was some debate among the American and European participants about the degree to which the risk of escalation depends on Russian President Vladimir Putin personally. One panelist argued that Russia often gets caricatured by discussions about Putin's personality and personal control over the Russian state. Another panelist argued it was important to retain the distinction between Putin and the Russian chain of command, where the impetus for a nuclear-use decision would be, and who would have to implement it. Some panelists argued that the war had passed the stage at which a personality would make a difference. Panelists generally agreed that while President Putin may have been the catalyst of the conflict, he will not be the principal factor in shaping how the war plays out. Most participants agreed that the Russian calculus would remain the same even if Vladimir Putin was replaced. The entirety of the system would still have to agree on a genuine use case for nuclear weapons. Another panelist added that it is unlikely anyone in the chain of command would say no to the use of nuclear force if the decision was made.

Panelists and discussants noted that the erosion of the Cold War arms control regime is a cause for concern. With the START, INF, ABM, and Open Skies treaties suspended, strategic stability has suffered. Not only do the sides have less information about the status of each other's nuclear forces, but the regular interactions these treaties enabled have ceased.

PERCEPTIONS OF RUSSIAN NUCLEAR COERCION

The United States is the ultimate guarantor of European security, with nuclear weapons playing a role in deterring the use of adversary nuclear war and reassuring allies wary of Moscow's intent. With the return of nuclear escalation risks in Europe, what key capabilities would European NATO members want to see the United States deploy?

The View from the Baltic States

Moscow believes its nuclear capabilities are essential for sustaining deterrence and achieving its objectives in the event of a direct confrontation with the United States and NATO. The threat of credible nuclear engagement remains the ultimate security guarantee for the Kremlin. This has been used to deter financial and military support for Ukraine. From the perspective of the Baltic states, the response to the invasion from countries such as Germany and France has been much more moderate than expected. While the threat of nuclear use remains low, the war in Ukraine has emphasized the need for the Baltic states to create contingency plans for nuclear escalation in the region. As one of the panelists noted, the narrative over the "defensibility" of the region and its geographic vulnerability to Russian aggression underscores the importance of US military and financial commitments to reinforce trust in NATO security guarantees.

The panelist outlined three key capabilities that the Baltic states welcome from the United States:

1. Deployment of comprehensive air and missile defense systems
2. Assistance in the detection and mitigation of military and civil nuclear threats
3. Increased assistance in countering Russian influence campaigns

Deployment of comprehensive air and missile defense systems

The lack of sufficient air and missile defense capabilities is considered the weakest link in Baltic security, leaving the Baltic states dependent on NATO Air Policing and Enhanced Forward Presence (EFP) battlegroups, both of which have limited air defense capabilities. All three Baltic states joined NATO's European Sky Shield initiative in October 2022 to further develop air and missile defense systems with NATO allies. While this is a positive development for the long term, in the short term, the Baltic states do not have

an adequate response to Russian Iskander ballistic missiles already deployed in neighboring Kaliningrad.

Assistance in the detection and mitigation of military and civil threats

The Baltic states must be ready to identify nuclear weapons use and mitigate its consequences. The United States should bolster the Baltic states' capacity to tackle these threats by providing assistance with mobile laboratories and equipment to detect and mitigate the consequences of nuclear use. As evidenced by the Russian shelling of the Zaporizhzhia nuclear power plant, the Baltic states are also highly vulnerable to civil nuclear threats. Several nuclear power plants border the Baltic states, such as the Astravets plant in Belarus. Another is under construction in Kaliningrad. Both are susceptible to possible Russian false flag sabotage operations.

Increase assistance in countering Russian influence campaigns

The psychological factor of Russian nuclear coercion cannot be overlooked. The Baltic states remain highly susceptible to Russian disinformation campaigns. Russian speakers in the Baltic states consume news media primarily in Russian. Demographic data shows that 40 percent of Russians living in Estonia do not speak any other language. In Latvia, 38 percent of the population identifies Russian as their primary language. The susceptibility to disinformation is exacerbated by the historic reliance of large swathes of the Baltic population on Russian sources for daily news. The Kremlin performs influence campaigns through Russian outlets, advancing narratives of exaggerated nuclear threats, claims of unreliable NATO security guarantees, and even threats of invasion. Additionally, more indirect influence campaigns over themes of inadequate healthcare funding, pension reform, and energy prices may influence Baltic state decision-makers to prioritize other issues over defense. Over time, these influence campaigns may stoke internal fears and divisions that will ultimately jeopardize Baltic national security interests.

Alliance Concern

Ongoing debates to consider:

NATO allies face a number of urgent debates and questions not just over nuclear deterrence but also conventional deterrence. Perceptions of NATO's new strategic concept of "defend forward" vary between allies. For example, while Poland and the Baltic states interpret this as more robust and permanently deployed NATO forces on the eastern flank, other countries refer to forward presence as the preferred military strategy, combining rotational deployments with enhanced rapid reinforcement capabilities. The panelist presenting made the argument that NATO has not yet found a military strategy that incorporates the concerns of its eastern allies.

The panelist outlined two possible nuclear debates that might arise within the alliance.

First, the more Russia struggles to achieve positive outcomes in Ukraine, the more Moscow could play the nuclear card along the eastern flank. The Kremlin might choose to move nuclear warheads into Kaliningrad or even announce such a policy publicly. This would open the NATO debate about a possible redeployment of US conventional short- and medium-range missiles to Europe, which has the potential to undermine alliance unity. NATO should weigh divergent interests among European allies on this issue and entertain the idea of a new dual-track approach.

Second, a debate might arise over the United States extending the nuclear sharing agreement to include Poland. Here, too, divisions in the alliance (notably with Germany) might be exposed. The United States should carefully evaluate whether extending nuclear sharing would actually strengthen NATO.

Germany

When doubt was cast on the US security guarantee in 2016, there was much debate in Germany regarding deterrence alternatives. At the time, French President Emmanuel Macron repeatedly invited Europeans to discuss the role of French nuclear forces in European security. The panelist noted that these deliberations were misinterpreted and misunderstood by German policymakers.

Since the war in Ukraine started, the “Westbindung”—the alliance with the United States and NATO—has been the primary interest of Germany. Chancellor Olaf Scholz announced the purchase of F-35s to replace Germany's aging fleet of Tornado aircraft soon after Russia's invasion began in late February 2022, which ensures that the German Air Force will retain the capability to deliver forward-deployed nuclear weapons in the future. The United States remains the paramount independent variable of Germany's security. A prime concern persists that if the United States were to significantly scale back its engagement in Europe, then, as a matter of necessity, Germany would have to turn to the French or British to discuss nuclear deterrence in Europe.

Western Reaction to Russian Nuclear Coercion

The alliance's reactions to Russian nuclear coercion have so far been calm, albeit diverse. The United States canceled tests of nuclear delivery vehicles while the French did the opposite, maintaining tests and visibly raising their alert posture. This is a good indication of diverging views in the alliance; NATO allies could have coordinated their responses more to send Russia a unified message about the effects of its coercion.

What kind of assets should the United States maintain in Europe? Four criteria were noted: 1) what is needed to reassure allies; 2) what is needed to deter Russia; 3) what may be needed for defense if deterrence fails; and 4) what will be needed to complement what the Europeans will be unwilling or unable to use in the future.

European Defense Conundrum

The participants argued about how much NATO members should invest in capabilities to prepare to resist Russian nuclear coercion or attack. Some participants felt that the United States would come to the rescue in a crisis, regardless of Europe's preparation, in order to shape the outcomes. For this reason, some felt that the US demand that NATO members contribute two percent of GDP is not very credible.

When the threat is there, the United States is there, meaning Europe is not incentivized to spend more on defense. There was debate among the panelists about whether Europe could defend itself without the United States. Some argued that it was contingent on the threat scenario. Others pointed to the fact that some European countries, like Poland and Ukraine, are on track to be major air and land military powers within the next decade. This would increase Europe's resilience to future Russian aggression.

There was consensus among participants that Europe needs to invest more in its defense, but many argued that the two percent NATO threshold was irrelevant. Some argued that investments should focus on equipment, readiness, and sustainability. One panelist pointed out that the two percent threshold is a bit skewed when looking at US defense spending; while all of the German or Latvian defense spending goes back to European security, US defense spending is divided among six geographic combatant commands.

The participants also discussed how a new “dual-track” approach might look, but one discussant pointed out that there is less prospect for successful arms control now than there was during the Cold War. Even if Russia came back to the table, there are other nuclear-armed powers that would now need to come too (e.g., China, United Kingdom, France). In addition, many new capabilities would have to be addressed (e.g., non-strategic nuclear weapons).

One participant suggested that leadership education was key to rebuilding the arms control regime. But another said we have been talking about the need for leadership education for decades only to see very little progress. The same applies to the recommendation for the West to “make its case” more effectively — this has long been advocated, and yet our adversaries are highly effective at poisoning our discourse.

EUROPEAN VIEWS ON NUCLEAR SHARING AND NUCLEAR DETERRENCE

The United States has deployed nuclear weapons in Europe since the late 1950s. The number of these nuclear weapons has decreased considerably since the end of the Cold War. Russia retains a large, diversified nuclear force spread across strategic and theater range systems designed to target Europe and North America. Deterrence, now, is guaranteed by the strategic forces of the United States and, to a lesser extent, those of France and the United Kingdom.

The current situation differs notably from the Cold War system of nuclear deterrence, which was more predictable thanks to some common rules agreed on by both sides. Currently, what makes the situation so difficult to navigate is that Russia has destroyed the post-Cold War security order in Europe (with global ramifications), but it is not yet clear what a new arrangement might look like. NATO and the United States have made clear that their response to Russia's use of nuclear weapons in Ukraine would be a conventional attack on the Russian military. Going forward, it is crucial to make NATO's conventional deterrent unambiguous so there is no room for misunderstanding on Russia's part.

One panelist noted that for Finland and Sweden, NATO's nuclear deterrence remains a somewhat controversial issue. On the one hand, maximizing deterrence is the main reason to join NATO, and NATO's collective deterrence is the most credible option available because it is backed by the US nuclear umbrella. On the other hand, it is the most contentious part of NATO membership and has been a caveat even in Finland, where support for NATO membership is generally overwhelming. The public discourse on the issue both in Finland and Sweden has exposed the low level of understanding of nuclear deterrence in the countries.

Panelists agreed that understanding of nuclear deterrence has declined notably in Western societies since the Cold War. It is part of Russia's strategy to use Western information spheres as a platform for its nuclear deterrence, which is hitherto inadequately understood in the West. We do not yet have rules for this game; cooperation on nonproliferation will be very difficult because Russia will not be willing to cooperate, and many other countries will draw ideas from this. Nuclear sharing is one of the biggest topics of public debate.

A European panelist observed that the erosion of security in Europe caused by Russia's invasion of Ukraine has made it seem logical to highlight the role of nuclear weapons as part of NATO's deterrence strategy. This has had repercussions even beyond Europe, with US allies in the Asia-Pacific also more openly speaking about the perceived security benefits of nuclear weapons. However, this panelist continued that the United States and Europe should not take the security benefits of nuclear weapons for granted. NATO came to rely on nuclear deterrence to compensate for its inferior conventional forces vis-a-vis those of the Soviet Union. Today, the conventional balance in Europe is very different. While the Russian readiness to wage a war of aggression has increased Europe's sense of insecurity, that war has also busted previous myths about the

advanced nature of Russian military capabilities. Indeed, the fact that Russia has so eagerly resorted to nuclear threats since the beginning of the war is, above all, a sign of weakness.

Panelists concluded that the way to address the threat from Russia should not be to boost NATO's own nuclear capabilities but to maintain credible conventional capabilities. But signaling readiness to use nuclear weapons against Russia is neither necessary nor credible when NATO has significant conventional superiority. NATO should approach the nuclear mission with caution and common sense. NATO is not weak, and it should not act as if it were by highlighting readiness to use nuclear weapons or signaling with non-strategic nuclear weapons. Apart from not being credible, this might add to escalation risks. In summary, the panel concluded that NATO should boost its conventional capabilities where needed but, at the same time, be careful not to further fuel Russia's already-exaggerated threat perceptions.

American panelists stated that the United States expects its European allies to take the lead in providing conventional forces for the deterrence of Russia. Whether European allies will meet this long-standing US preference is unclear. One American panelist argued that a major insight of the war in Ukraine is that the United States rallies to defend countries that take their own security seriously.

Panelists concluded that the most effective way to reduce nuclear risks in Europe is to reestablish strategic stability dialogue and arms control talks between Russia and the United States—this could ultimately also address non-strategic nuclear weapons.

EVOLUTION OF RUSSIAN CONVENTIONAL FORCES AND NUCLEAR POLICY

Russian investments in conventional, precision-strike missiles were intended to eliminate roles and missions previously dedicated to nuclear weapons. Russia had also sought to use conventional weapons as tools of coercion—using conventional cruise missiles to hold command and control and critical infrastructure targets at risk.

Russian military planning and force employment in Ukraine has revealed deficiencies in targeting and campaign planning, raising questions about how Russian strategists and planners will use conventional and nuclear forces for coercion in the future.

What has the war in Ukraine revealed about Russian conventional deficiencies?

When considering deficiencies with the conventional leg of the Russian armed forces, the three Russian Principles of War are useful to consider: offense, mass, and maneuver. The dominance of offense in the Russian military doctrine illustrates their dedication to overwhelm wartime opponents, but this has proved to be a challenge as Moscow faces the daunting task of modernizing and expanding forces while engaging in combat with Ukraine.

Offense

The push for force modernization since 2012 provided massive investments in mechanized and tank forces that fell short of ensuring a preponderance of power and speed during the invasion of Ukraine. At the outset of the invasion, the Russian attack relied on an undermanned peacetime manning structure. The dominance of offense in Russian military doctrine predisposes heavy divisions to shoulder the greatest level of burden. Their lack of military manpower translated to a lack of echelonment, and once the initial forces were depleted, sufficient resources were not yet available, and by the summer of 2022, they lost their offensive capability. The major takeaway is that Russia cannot fight and win a war decisively without military mobilization, which is unpopular but consistent with how Russian leaders set up the military after the Cold War.

Mass

In response, mobilization and similar quick-action policies were meant to address some of the challenges facing the Russian military, but they have not yet been shown to be of significant benefit. While the only producer of Russian tanks has been working around the clock attempting to modernize, the use of 50-year-old tanks on the battlefield shows the degradation of Russian warfighting capacity. Russian Defense Minister Sergey Shoigu is reverting to Cold War strategy, developing what can be described as a "Soviet legacy force, at least in terms of force structure," and announcing in December of 2022 the creation of five new artillery divisions and the re-establishment of the Moscow and Leningrad military districts in January of 2023. Efforts to increase armed forces personnel to 1.5 million (roughly 30 percent) to back-fill the estimated 97 percent of Russian armed forces already in Ukraine are greatly challenging the massing capabilities and continuous planning abilities of Russian military leadership. Russia, therefore, is facing a more severe crisis than its Western counterparts with its defense industrial base. This suggests that Russia will struggle to rebuild its military and replace the Soviet-era stockpiles it has lost. This may force Russian leaders to turn to nuclear weapons for security.

Maneuver

Contemporary Russian ground forces are inflexible and not mobile enough to maneuver. A specific hindrance to their performance is rigidity in mission command, despite efforts to remove manual control rigidity of maneuver since 2019 when Chief of Russian General Staff and Army General Valery Gerasimov initiated a move to a more innovative tactical approach rather than one fixated on field manual tactics. Gerasimov's push for greater flexibility and independence on the battlefield did not have enough implementation time to proliferate throughout the command structure, and this allowed Ukrainian forces to take advantage of situations where Russia was capable and expected to be successful. Cognizant of the shortcomings within the conventional military and the decimation of Russian manpower and materiel, it will be important to consider whether they will be more heavily reliant on nuclear strategy as they rebuild the military and reconstruct doctrine after seeing its shortcomings on the battlefield.

Looking Forward

A panelist noted, "We are in a war of reservists; the most adaptable will win." A lot of focus will be placed in the near term on Russian airborne forces. As one panelist noted, it will be important for the United States and allies to keep in mind that Russia "faces the daunting task of modernizing and expanding its forces while simultaneously engaging in combat operations in Ukraine." Furthermore, the requirement for modernization and growth is taking place in Russia while the Russian economy is under serious sanctions that hinder the import of key technologies. The invasion and continued war in Ukraine have led to significant degradation of Russian military capabilities—this is clear. Doctrinal shifts in response to lessons learned by the Russian military will be important in determining strategic adjustments to the warfighting approach. One panelist noted the misjudgment of the West in placing too much value on the measurements of defense capabilities from Russia (i.e., weapons arsenal totals, machinery developments, etc.) where the intangibles have been more valuable in predicting weak points for Russian warfighting (i.e., endemic corruption in the armed forces and the risk appetite of Russian military leadership). Regardless of future planning, Western allies need to recognize the importance of the aforementioned issues and related challenges depleting Russian force posture.

Future Russian Nuclear Strategy

Regardless of the outcome of the war, the consensus was that the degradation of Russia's conventional capabilities would make Russia more reliant on its nuclear strategy out of self-preservation. Moscow is likely to focus on maintaining nuclear credibility. One panelist was surprised that Russia had not yet used nuclear weapons. The panelist reasoned that this is due to military leadership's fixation on the continued use of conventional warfare and argued that only later on in the war we might see the creation of missile brigades, but this will be hampered by rebuilding efforts across the military. Also important is the strategic value of Kaliningrad: Before the war, it served primarily as a psychological asset, but it will likely become more of a liability to Russia's perceived stability with Sweden and Finland's NATO accession.

Implications and Recommendations

The United States may be on the precipice of a dual arms race with Russia and China. Tensions with Russia will not subside after the war is over. Regardless of the outcome, Russia will need to be contained for at least three decades, and the political and economic structure to facilitate this will be required by Western allies.

EUROPEAN DEFENSE INVESTMENT AND CONVENTIONAL DEFENSE

The invasion of Ukraine has promoted a re-evaluation of European foreign policy and has spurred national investments in defense and procurement. The panel discussion on European defense investment and conventional defense began with one panelist identifying defense areas where Europe is lacking, acknowledging that all major systems capability programs, such as Future Combat Air Systems (FCAS) and Main Ground Combat Systems, will not be ready until the 2040s. The following list highlights additional capabilities that Europe is lacking:

- Airborne Early-Warning Aircraft
- Aircraft and Weapons
- Anti-Submarine
- Air-to-Air Refueling Aircraft
- Cyber Reconnaissance
- ISR and Electronic Warfare (EW) Aircraft and Uninhabited Aerial Vehicles (UAV)
- Long-Range Air-Defense Systems
- Space-Based Intelligence, Surveillance, and Reconnaissance (ISR)
- Strategic Airlift
- Suppression of Enemy Air Defense/Destruction of Enemy Air Defense (SEAD/DEAD)
- Subsurface/Surface Maritime Strike

The war in Ukraine has exposed capacity-related challenges with reserve and munition stocks and a lack of defense industrial capacity to surge production during a crisis. Readiness is especially constrained in combined arms training above the brigade level—forces remain under-equipped, and carrying out multi-domain operations at scale would be nearly impossible.

One panelist argued that the deficiencies in US production capacity could upend plans for a Taiwan contingency. The panelist mentioned a study that determined that the United States would take an average

of 8.4 years to replace the equipment and munitions expended during combat. Another study found it would take between 3 and 8 years to replace a single US naval vessel, depending upon the type and class. To alleviate the potentially depleted defense capabilities in the context of American military forces focused on China, European allies need reserve reforms to bolster capacity, training for increased readiness, and technological investment/advancement for defense capabilities.

Reserve Reform

The size of reserve forces across European NATO militaries requires structural reorganization for expansion to take place. Reserves should be more actively integrated with greater uniformity in training to support high-intensity combat operations. This is the basic prerequisite for reserves to be capable of replacing active-duty personnel put out of action in a worst-case scenario and could be facilitated through more hybrid units consisting of active and reserve soldiers in addition to pure reserve units. When it comes to the manpower issue, one way to address it is to add a reserve requirement following contract completion for active-duty troops; this could alleviate some manpower concerns. France is looking into doubling the size of its reserve, and Poland is also in the process of expanding its reserve force—the Territorial Defence Forces—with mixed success. Despite calls for German reserve reform, including a new strategy announced in 2019, very little has changed. Though conscription may be seen as a solution to manpower concerns, it will not be the right choice for Europe's leading militaries to regenerate combat power in a future state-on-state war. The financial burden and force restructuring would leave forces vulnerable, which is not ideal in the current environment. Reform and expansion of reserves pose less financial burden and constraint on military functionality and fewer political roadblocks. The reserve reform could also boost European NATO members' staying power in future conflicts against major military powers.

Training

Increasing the scale, scope, frequency, and length of military exercises is essential. European NATO militaries will need to introduce more rigorous training schedules modeled on the US reserve system and National Guard. Today's situation—where there is perhaps one mandatory exercise every other year, every five years, or never at all—is clearly not sufficient to maintain military proficiency. The exercises also need to become larger and more complex. The war in Ukraine has shown that large-scale conventional military operations are difficult to execute and so prone to friction that they cannot be adequately simulated in a synthetic training environment or tabletop exercise. France is among the first European countries to hold such a large-scale, divisional-level military exercise: Exercise Orion, involving around 10,000 troops, which took place in March 2023. Poland plans to call up 200,000 inactive reservists for various training exercises. These exercises, above all, need to hone skills in combined arms operations where “strengths of one platform or weapon systems supplement the strengths and weaknesses of another.” Neither Russia nor Ukraine was capable of executing such combined arms operations effectively at scale, and, as a result, they suffered more tremendous losses during the war.

Technology

Quick force generation for a high-intensity war in Europe will require technology to play a vital part in preparation during the years ahead. For example, the proliferation and integration of crewed and uncrewed ground and air systems as envisioned in, for example, the German-French-Italian Main Ground Combat System or the German-French-Spanish Future Combat Air System, could help substitute soldiers with uncrewed systems, act as force multipliers, and take over more dangerous missions in a high-intensity

conflict. That will help reduce casualties. Technology, however, will not be a panacea. Organizational, structural, and doctrinal reforms will also need to happen for effective hedging of military aggression.

Another panelist identified two points that resonated with the participants: (1) great powers are perhaps at their most dangerous in a diminishing power state, as Russia is now, and (2) the United States is in a unique position in which it is carrying out simultaneous deterrence in two priority theaters. Though a renewed emphasis on allies and partners working together via integrated deterrence was made clear in the recent National Defense Strategy, Washington is in the process of reframing defense in the near term. The United States has done a lackluster job of communicating its needs to Europe in the medium- to long-term, largely because the news is not what they want to hear: European allies need to shore up deterrence because American focus will increasingly shift toward the Indo-Pacific theater and China challenge. Credibility and resolve are necessary for deterrence, and properly addressing integration will achieve an impactful deterrence signal.

Integration

Whether it addresses stockpiling munitions, the defense industrial base, or defense systems, integration is a challenge because it requires information sharing. How can you develop an integrated missile defense network if NATO allies are not willing to share what you need 360 coverage on? A systems approach to integration with integrated sensing networks and integrated counter-UAS networks would fail because NATO allies are not keen to share. This is a political challenge and one that the United States, in particular, struggles with. Political priorities shift every four years in Washington, and threat perceptions are politicized. The biggest force transformations since the 1980s are happening, and the next ten years are crucial in defining what we want as allies. To establish transparency and trust, the United States needs to elucidate what capabilities are where and determine recommendations that some European states should seek to acquire. Washington also needs to identify the top threats/scenarios in the European theater, walk through key warfighting missions the US allies and partners expect to face, and, from that point, map out strategic and operational planning. The greatest missed opportunity for addressing integration is enhancing strategic and operational planning. This is not happening largely because of the United States, and an honest retrospective needs to be done from the American perspective to address where this could be improved in the future. Finding unison approaches when it comes to battle management systems and bilateral agreements on information sharing could be force multipliers for bridging integration. The US government also needs to reiterate to European allies that the Indo-Pacific has different force needs and that American presence will not disappear in the event of a conflict with China.

Ideal Outcomes

The reinvigoration of military power in Europe and the integration of NATO allies will challenge Russian aggression two-fold. Following the full-scale invasion in February of 2022, Russia had low expectations of NATO allies and failed to anticipate the united support mobilized to the eastern flank. An expansion of European defense capabilities and integration with allies will capitalize on a diminished Russia and prevent the resurgence of a stronger Russia. Looking ahead, the speed and pace of warfare in the future will require integrated multi-domain operations, and allies in Europe will be more capable of succeeding.

KEY FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Finding: Russian nuclear threats have been effective in deterring earlier and more robust Western support of Ukraine, and in shifting Western goals from escalation management to escalation avoidance.

Recommendation: The marginally increased risk of escalation this entails is more than offset by the increased chance of settling the war on terms acceptable to Ukraine and its Western partners. The United States and NATO should be cognizant of Russian red lines, but — as a first step — reiterate its own red lines and takes steps to ensure that US nuclear signaling and clearly understood in Russia.

Finding: Russia might still be incentivized to use nuclear weapons if its military forces face a rapid collapse in Ukraine.

Recommendation: Western governments should be attendant to signs of a rapid Russian collapse in Ukraine and the risk of escalation this carries. In such a scenario, a dual-track strategy is advisable. One track should seek to slow down the pace of events on the battlefield to allow less time-constrained decision-making; the second track should convince Russia that nuclear use would lead to a worse outcome than accepting conventional defeat in Ukraine.

Finding: Nuclear literacy—defined as an understanding of the role of nuclear weapons in deterring war and managing escalation within a war—has declined among Western publics and policymakers.

Recommendation: NATO member states should prioritize nuclear literacy among their publics and policymakers. Individually, they should work to improve nuclear literacy among publics and policymakers. One way NATO as a whole can do this would be to establish a NATO-accredited Centre of Excellence on deterrence and strategic stability. NATO should also develop short courses on these topics for its member states and policymakers.

Finding: Nuclear weapons will play a greater role in Russian post-war deterrence strategy and it may seek to enhance the credibility of its deterrent threats by developing lower-yield weapons and expanding the number of conditions under which it would use them.

Recommendation: This is a deterrence issue, underscoring the necessity of ensuring that US and conventional nuclear threats are credible to deter all potential nuclear escalation scenarios. This will require clearer declarative statements about the situations that would lead to a conventional response to nuclear use, as well as a reiteration of US and NATO declaratory policy on nuclear use.

Finding: The collapse of the nuclear arms control could lead to new nuclear weapons states.

Recommendation: Western governments should examine ways to strengthen strategic stability and crisis stability with Russia absent the regular interaction and information provided by an arms control regime. This might take the form of informal but regular military channels of communication on strategic issues.

Finding: European thinking on nuclear weapons is changing, with more countries seeing nuclear weapons as critical to deterring Russia. At the same time, there is a mismatch between US thinking and that of some European countries on responsibilities for conventional deterrence. While many European allies, especially on NATO's eastern flank, argue for a more permanent US presence, the United States expects European allies to shoulder more of the burden of conventional deterrence.

Recommendation: The United States and its European allies need to create more pathways for non-nuclear weapons states in Europe to participate in the NATO nuclear exercise — SNOWCAT. This approach would allow for the inclusion of current and new NATO members in nuclear weapons planning.

APPENDIX

During the dialogue, the following themes emerged that, while not directly related to panel topics, nevertheless contribute to understanding the dialogue's major themes.

Russia's Strategic Information Campaigns

Moscow routinely issues open or veiled nuclear threats to which the West and NATO then react and exhaustively analyze. This one-way communications campaign has distracted the alliance from any evidence-based policymaking and has prompted a shift in focus from escalation management to escalation avoidance. One panelist recommended that NATO stop playing the Kremlin's "game" and return to two-way (versus reactive) communications.

Too much Western attention has been focused on what Russia is saying rather than what Russia is doing. So far, Russian nuclear threats have not had to be plausible to achieve their effect (information warfare). Part of the reason Russia has carried out this information campaign so successfully is that it was not a new initiative in February 2022. Russia has carried out an intensive and focused campaign of propaganda on the state and official levels to convince people that miscalculation with Russia would inevitably lead to escalation, which would inevitably lead to nuclear use. In this narrative, anything that impedes or offends Russia—let alone the prospect of defeat or "humiliation"—could lead to nuclear use.

Panelists expressed the need to examine the shift in the conversation on this topic that has happened in the West in light of this long-term strategic information campaign. That shift has been from discussion of Russian escalation management to escalation avoidance, and that is a startling success for Russia. Now, the likelihood of Russian nuclear use is actually the starting point of the conversation in most public and quite a few private discussions of what Russia might do. Precisely because the discussion of Russian responses has been focused on Russia's propaganda, it is divorced from any objective assessment of either doctrine or posture. There has been practically no attention paid to what the military is saying and doing, and it is the military that would be making key decisions around escalation and nuclear use. This is a critical missing piece of the conversation.

There needs to be a clear understanding in the West between the use of nuclear weapons as a tool of information warfare and deterrence versus their actual use for battlefield and strategic defense.

One panelist noted that Russia has successfully used "threat inflation" of nuclear weapons to shape Western policy. While Russian nuclear rhetoric has subsided in the last few months, the effects of Russia's long-term deterrence campaign are still impeding evidence-based policymaking in both Europe and the United States.

The possession of nuclear weapons is still providing Russia with a get-out-of-jail-free card to escape the consequences of its actions. This sets a highly dangerous precedent for the rest of the world.

Deterrence Signaling

The panelists discussed how NATO should respond to Russian nuclear coercion and what the United States should provide to manage the risk of escalation and deter spillover from the conflict.

At the beginning of the war, US support was constrained by two factors: 1) misperceptions of how quickly Ukrainian forces could absorb US conventional hardware and 2) fear of escalation with Russia. In the spring,

we were in uncharted territory, and while many believe that the overestimation of Russian military potential was a major driver in US decision-making, this is not necessarily the case.

Europe and the United States need to have a wider grasp of the difference between the use of nuclear weapons as a tool of information warfare and their actual use. To this point, Russian nuclear threats have not had to be plausible to achieve their effect (information warfare). Europe and the United States need stronger messaging to ensure that there is no doubt in Putin's mind that the consequences of nuclear use would be catastrophic not only for Russia but also for him personally. The United States may think it is already doing this well; from the outside, it appears dubious.

In light of the trend of carelessness and risk-seeking behavior that Russia is exemplifying, NATO and the wider West need to rethink their behavior to deal with the new world order in a way that mitigates risk while maintaining a steadfast deterrence posture. The United States needs stronger and more specific signaling to Russia on the consequences of using nuclear weapons. Diplomatic efforts to condemn the use of threatening language need to become part of the United States and Western strategy.

There is a tendency to label things an adversary does as “irrational” because we would prefer them not to do it. We misunderstand the models that adversaries have on how the world works. We need to use that context when thinking about rational versus irrational decision-making. Furthermore, we are often unable to distinguish between threats Russian leaders actually perceive and those they contrive in order to accuse the West of undermining Russian security and deter further actions of this type.

Rationality is a conversation about clear logic—the problem is that countries are not people, but they are run by people. What people think matters, perception matters, and people make decisions based on the environment and the information available. Leaders can be rational but unreasonable in that they use a calculation of costs and benefits to determine how to achieve their objectives, but those objectives themselves are unreasonable or unacceptable to other parties.

We often base our analysis on the assumption that a leader is rational, but they can become increasingly unreasonable over time, especially when they become obsessed and emotional regarding an issue. Calling things irrational or referring to likelihoods in percentages is deeply unhelpful because it frames the conversation in a certain way and constrains action.

When leaders convince themselves that conflict is inevitable, they see the risk and cost of war as lower the sooner it happens. This leads to an incentive to act pre-emptively. In a crisis, this behavior is destabilizing.

Russian Threat Perceptions

The prominent concern of nuclear escalation means US policy tends to lean on the side of caution first. At the beginning of the war, Russia was very effective at coercive nuclear threats, and the United States was deterred by these threats.

In six months, Europe will be suffering the repercussions of electoral cycles and institutional breaks. There will be a whole new set of decision-makers that will need to be re-educated as to what exactly the problem is. They might have to relearn the hard way and, therefore, might succumb to Russian threats where the preconditions have been set about the assumption of the likelihood of Russian nuclear use.

Panelists discussed the impact of a Russian overestimation of NATO's potential response to nuclear use. One panelist expressed his doubts as to whether NATO would have a “meaningful” reaction. It is a persistent habit of Western countries to remove from that risk-benefit calculus as many of the risks for Russia as they can to reassure Russia that whatever it does, it is not going to be accountable. There has been no military solution to the conflict in Ukraine since 2014, leaving Russia free to pursue its own military solution. For

example, in the last few days before the invasion, the United States, United Kingdom, and Canada pulled their training teams out of Ukraine to avoid being impacted by the invasion.

We want Russia to think that there might be a nuclear response because that complicates its decision to use nuclear weapons. One panelist noted that there is a tendency to use language such as “grave and serious consequences,” but this, in practice, communicates nothing and commits to no specific action. Therefore, the panelist argued, the West’s deterrence posture is quite weak. The West is deterred from sending capabilities and puts restrictions on capabilities in aid to Ukraine, and cannot claim it will be less deterred in the event of nuclear use. The West is already very deterred, and Russia has not even deployed forces, conducted tests, or engaged in the types of activities expected to signal intent to use nuclear weapons.

The decision framework for invading would be different from the framework for using nuclear weapons, but the underlying problem is the basis of the facts and assessment of the world, which are very different if one is sitting inside the Kremlin than if one is sitting outside it. The key criterion for a decision is whether it will make things better or worse. Putin had every reason to believe that moving into Ukraine would make things better. In a decision to use nuclear weapons, the facts that would go into this decision would be skewed, just as those for the decision to invade Ukraine were.

We should not take for granted that Western countries would respond to Russian first use of nuclear weapons by imposing the “grave” costs they have threatened. We need to convince not only Russia but also our own decision-makers that failure to impose costs would be catastrophic for global history, not just Europe. It would show that the use of nuclear weapons is a way to get what you want without suffering deserved consequences.

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