



Research Article

Russia's Changing Nuclear Doctrine in the Shadow of Its Invasion of Ukraine

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Abstract: This study examines the factors behind Russia's revision of its nuclear doctrine in 2024. It explores the significance of security-related documents and analyzes Russia's nuclear doctrines of 2020 and 2024 within the context of change. The findings highlight the impact of the 2022 invasion of Ukraine, which reshaped regional and global balances, leading Russia to lower its nuclear deterrence threshold and broaden the conditions of its use. Both external pressures, such as Western opposition and sanctions, and internal challenges, including domestic unrest, influenced this shift. The revised doctrine reflects Russia's attempt to assert a more aggressive nuclear posture while addressing evolving security dynamics.

Keywords: Russo-Ukraine war, military doctrine, nuclear doctrine, nuclear deterrence.

Introduction

This study examines the reasons behind the Russian Federation's 2024 revision of its nuclear doctrine. It first emphasizes the importance of security-related documents for Russia. Since the Cold War, Russia has periodically published military doctrines to shape its security strategies in response to evolving global security dynamics. These security documents are presented in the study chronologically and within their historical context. An analysis of these documents reveals that Russia's official texts are revised in response to contemporary developments.

Russia's invasion of Ukraine has led to significant shifts in both regional and global power dynamics, and the ongoing Russia-Ukraine war has profoundly influenced Moscow's decision to revise its nuclear doctrine in 2024. In this new

doctrine, Russia has lowered its nuclear deterrence threshold and broadened the conditions under which nuclear weapons may be used. This study analyses Russia's nuclear doctrines in the evolving context. The main objective of the study is to examine the internal and external factors that contributed to Russia's decision to revise its nuclear doctrine following the 2022 invasion of Ukraine. In this regard, the 2020 and 2024 nuclear doctrines are compared, with a particular focus on the notable changes introduced in the 2024 version. A qualitative case study approach was employed to address this research question.

Although Russia's nuclear rhetoric has significantly intensified since the onset of its full-scale invasion of Ukraine, this rhetorical escalation has not been matched by a corresponding transformation in its nuclear strategy. As Wachs emphasizes, despite intensified rhetoric, Russia's nuclear policy reflects continuity rather than fundamental change, with strategic thinking still rooted in prewar principles.¹

This study argues that there has been a change in the doctrine, even if largely rhetorical, and examines the reasons for this change. Both structural (external) and internal factors have played a role in revising the nuclear doctrine.² Externally, Russia has faced strong opposition, particularly from the European Union and the United States, both of which have sought to isolate and weaken Russia through sanctions. This opposition has compelled Russia to adopt more aggressive policies, such as reducing the threshold for the use of nuclear arms. For instance, Kremlin press secretary Dmitry Peskov, referring to the official change in Russia's nuclear stance, stated that the shift in nuclear doctrine can be seen as a signal to the West.³ The prolonged stalemate in the Russia-Ukraine war, coupled with the failure to achieve a decisive victory, poses a significant challenge for Russia and raises questions about the effectiveness of its military. Internally, challenges such as the Wagner rebellion, which threatened centralized authority, and declining public support for the government due to the protracted war, can be considered among the significant factors that drove the Russian government to change its nuclear doctrine, as Putin's nuclear rhetoric is aimed not only at external actors but also at influencing the Russian public.⁴

¹ Lydia Wachs, "Russian Nuclear Roulette? Elites and Public Debates on Nuclear Weapons in Moscow after Ukraine," *The Nonproliferation Review* 30, no. 4-6 (2023): 173-196, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10736700.2024.2435706>.

² Rishi Paul, "Bluff and Bluster: Why Putin Revised Russia's Nuclear Doctrine," European Leadership Network, November 25, 2024, <https://europeanleadershipnetwork.org/commentary/bluff-and-bluster-why-putin-revised-russias-nuclear-doctrine/>; Nicole Grajewski, "Russia's Updated Nuclear Doctrine Isn't a Blueprint for Weapons Use. Its Primary Value Is Manipulation," Commentary, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, November 26, 2024, <https://carnegieendowment.org/emissary/2024/11/russia-nuclear-doctrine-update-weapons-use-sovereignty>.

³ "Russia's Updated Nuclear Doctrine Is a Signal to the West, Kremlin Confirms," *TASS Russian News Agency*, November 24, 2024, <https://tass.com/politics/1876853>.

⁴ Michal Smetana and Michal Onderco, "What the Russian Public Thinks About the Use of Nuclear Weapons," *Arms Control Today*, October 2024, www.armscontrol.org/act/

Due to the aforementioned pressures, Russia has increasingly used rhetoric related to its nuclear weapons and nuclear deterrence. In addition to keeping the use of nuclear weapons as a bargaining chip on the table, Russia has sought to create new strategic maneuvering space by lowering the threshold for nuclear deterrence and expanding the conditions under which nuclear weapons may be used in its official documents, aiming to demonstrate that its threats are not merely bluffs.

Background on Russian Military Doctrines

As in previous administrations, President Vladimir Putin has continued the tradition of issuing key strategic documents—such as the *Security Concept*, the *Military Doctrine*, and the *Foreign Policy Concept*—which assess the international security environment and articulate Russia's core foreign and defense policy priorities. These documents have been renewed or amended periodically in parallel with developments in the international arena.⁵ Russia's military doctrine defines the military, political, strategic, and economic foundations of national security. It provides a formal framework for understanding the nature of potential wars, including their preparation, prevention, and execution. The doctrine also establishes key concepts and terminology used in Russia's foreign and security policies, reflecting shifts in the Kremlin's threat perceptions. Since 1993, Russia has issued four iterations of its military doctrine, published in 1993, 2000, 2010, and 2014. These doctrines have typically been introduced following significant geopolitical or security events.⁶

After the dissolution of the Soviet Union, the Russian Federation published its first military doctrine in 1993. This doctrine, issued for the first time in the country's history, included three main sections: "Political Bases of the Military Doctrine," "Military Foundations of the Military Doctrine, and "Military-Technical Cooperation Between the Russian Federation and Foreign Countries."⁷ This document serves as a foundational framework in the military field. The 1993 Military Doctrine underscored the critical importance of defending against large-scale naval and air strikes that employ high-precision weapons. It also outlined two key defense policy objectives: maintaining consistent nuclear deterrence

2024-10/features/what-russian-public-thinks-about-use-nuclear-weapons#endnote15.

⁵ Habibe Özdal, "Russia's Security Doctrines in the Putin Era," *Güvenlik Yazıları Serisi*, No. 56, 2021, https://trguvenlikportali.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/PutinRusyasyasiGüvenlikDoktrinleri_HabibeOzdal_v.1.pdf. – in Turkish

⁶ "Russian Military Doctrine: RSI Primer," 2022, 1, <https://oe.tradoc.army.mil/wp-content/uploads/2022/06/RSI-Russian-Military-Doctrine-Primer-Final-single-page-04282022.pdf>. For more information and all other official doctrines cited in this study, see: 2014 Doctrine, <https://rg.ru/documents/2014/12/30/doktrina-dok.html>; 2010 Doctrine, <http://kremlin.ru/supplement/461>; 2000 Doctrine, <https://base.garant.ru/181993/>; 1993 Doctrine, <http://kremlin.ru/acts/bank/4747>. – all in Russian

⁷ "The Basic Provisions of the Military Doctrine of the Russian Federation," Federation of American Scientists, <https://nuke.fas.org/guide/russia/doctrine/russia-mil-doc.html>.

while effectively preparing to manage local conflicts, which included conducting peace enforcement and peacekeeping operations concurrently.⁸ It represents a transitional document shaped by the development of state structures, the implementation of democratic reforms, and the establishment of a new international relations system. The doctrine articulates a systematic approach officially adopted by the state to prevent wars and armed conflicts, organize the nation's defense readiness, counter threats to the state's military security, and guide the use of the Russian Armed Forces and other units to protect Russia's vital interests.⁹

The Military Doctrine issued in 2000 was introduced shortly after Vladimir Putin's victory in the presidential elections. This doctrine closely aligns with the structure of the 1993 doctrine and Russia's newly adopted national security concept. Like the 1993 doctrine, the 2000 military doctrine was characterized as a transitional and defensive strategy. Its primary goal was to safeguard Russia's fundamental security interests. Once these interests were secured, Russia expressed its willingness to engage in discussions with key international partners on further arms control agreements, confidence-building measures, and the establishment of a comprehensive security framework. A central aspect of the doctrine was its emphasis on nuclear capabilities to deter aggression against Russia and its allies. In coordination with the United States and other nuclear powers, Russia also expressed its readiness to reduce its nuclear stockpile to "minimum levels consistent with strategic stability." Despite this declared willingness, nuclear weapons remained the cornerstone of Russia's national security. These measures, however, were interpreted by many as having lowered the threshold for Russia's potential use of nuclear weapons.¹⁰

The 2010 Russian military doctrine was introduced at a time when a significant budget surplus and growing global influence created new military challenges and opportunities. Building on previous strategies, the doctrine prioritized protecting national security interests in a rapidly evolving international environment while addressing both traditional and emerging threats. The main objectives of the doctrine included fostering partnerships through frameworks like BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China, and the Republic of South Africa) and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization; advancing international security cooperation in line with the UN Charter; reinforcing alliances within the post-Soviet

⁸ Alexei G. Arbatov, "The Transformation of Russian Military Doctrine: Lessons Learned from Kosovo and Chechnya," *The Marshall Center Papers*, No. 2, 2000, George C. Marshall European Center for Security Studies, www.marshallcenter.org/en/publications/marshall-center-papers/transformation-russian-military-doctrine-lessons-learned-kosovo-and-chechnya/transformation-russian-military.

⁹ Charles J. Dick, "The Military Doctrine of the Russian Federation," *The Journal of Slavic Military Studies* 7, no. 3 (1994): 481-506, 481-482, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13518049408430155>.

¹⁰ Jyotsna Bakshi, "Russia's National Security Concepts and Military Doctrines: Continuity and Change," *Strategic Analysis: A Monthly Journal of the IDSA* 24, no. 7 (2000), https://ciaotest.cc.columbia.edu/olj/sa/sa_oct00baj01.html.

space; enhancing collective security treaties; and collaborating with organizations such as NATO and the European Union if Russian interests were acknowledged. The doctrine emphasizes Russia's adherence to international law and pursuit of equitable security. It also highlights Russia's determination to maintain its status as a key global power while adjusting to evolving geopolitical challenges without introducing major changes to its defense policy.¹¹

In 2014, Russia revised its military doctrine, introducing and clarifying key terms and conditions relevant to Russia's military strategy. The war on Ukraine and escalating tensions with the United States and the European Union highlighted some of the most significant national security challenges Russia had faced since the early 1990s. During an expanded session of the Ministry of Defense Collegium in December 2014, President Putin emphasized the document's consistent nature, stating, "Our military doctrine does not change; it is purely defensive in nature, but we will defend our safety consistently and harshly."¹²

Evaluation of 2020 and 2024 Documents on Nuclear Deterrence

This study adopts a selective analysis to compare Russia's 2020 and 2024 nuclear doctrines. It focuses on the most relevant and striking parts of the texts rather than the entire documents.

Russia issued its Nuclear Doctrine in 2020 and again in 2024. The revisions introduced in 2024 reflect Moscow's evolving strategic concerns amid growing geopolitical tensions, particularly related to Ukraine. By expanding the conditions under which nuclear weapons can be used, Russia aims to strengthen its deterrence capabilities. On September 24, 2024, President Vladimir Putin announced revisions to the nation's nuclear doctrine, officially adopted on November 19, as the "Fundamentals of State Policy of the Russian Federation in the Field of Nuclear Deterrence." These revisions expand the circumstances for potential nuclear weapon use to include conventional attacks that endanger the sovereignty or territorial integrity of either Russia or Belarus.¹³

Putin made statements regarding the updated nuclear doctrine, noting, "Along with the Military Doctrine, this is a document that officially defines and details Russia's nuclear strategy. First of all, it establishes the basic principle of using nuclear weapons, namely, the use of nuclear forces is an extreme measure to protect the country's sovereignty." He further remarked that the military-political situation in the global arena has changed, new military threats to Russia and its allies have emerged and, therefore, the doctrine must be adapted to "current realities" by further clarifying the conditions for the use of nuclear weapons.¹⁴

¹¹ Michał Pietkiewicz, "The Military Doctrine of the Russian Federation," *Polish Political Science Yearbook* 47, no. 3 (2018): 505-520, 513, <https://pdfs.semanticscholar.org/c91d/fdd4d1c52cd83d17aeac1d6e2122c4cbd55d.pdf>.

¹² Pietkiewicz, "The Military Doctrine of the Russian Federation," 512.

¹³ Paul, "Bluff and Bluster: Why Putin Revised Russia's Nuclear Doctrine."

¹⁴ "What Changes Russia Is Making to Its Nuclear Doctrine; Vladimir Putin Unveiled Them at the Security Council Meeting," *Radio RBC*, September 25, 2024, www.rbc.ru/

In 2020, Putin approved a decree titled “Foundations of State Policy of the Russian Federation in the Area of Nuclear Deterrence.” This document does not significantly alter the nuclear policy outlined in the 2014 Military Doctrine or earlier versions from 2000 and 2010. Instead, it provides clarification on previously ambiguous or unclear points and elaborates on certain existing provisions.¹⁵

In 2024, the “Fundamentals of State Policy of the Russian Federation on Nuclear Deterrence” was approved. The 2020 doctrine establishes nuclear deterrence as a defensive measure, reserving nuclear weapons exclusively for cases where Russia faces an attack (especially Article 5). Unlike the 2014 Military Doctrine and earlier versions, it does not distinguish between different levels of military conflict. However, it allows nuclear responses not only in cases of large-scale nuclear attacks, known as “global conflict” scenarios, but also in situations where Russia’s conventional forces are insufficient to counter them, known as “regional conflict” scenarios. While better alignment with previous documents would have been ideal, the guidelines remain clear and leave no room for misunderstanding.¹⁶

Article 5 (in both the 2020 and 2024 doctrines) underlines Russia’s views about nuclear weapons. The 2020 doctrine states: “The Russian Federation considers nuclear weapons exclusively as a means of deterrence, their use being an extreme and compelled measure, and takes all necessary efforts to reduce nuclear threat and prevent aggravation of interstate relations, that could trigger military conflicts, including nuclear ones.” However, in 2024, the word “exclusively” was removed from Article 5. The absence of this word in the new doctrine suggests a broadening of the scope of nuclear deterrence.¹⁷

Article 9 of the 2020 doctrine states: “Nuclear deterrence is aimed at ensuring that a potential adversary understands the inevitability of retaliation in the event of aggression against the Russian Federation and/or its allies.” In the 2024 version, Article 9 includes new additions and reads as follows:

The Russian Federation exercises nuclear deterrence toward a potential adversary, defined as individual states and military coalitions (blocs, alliances), that consider the Russian Federation as a potential adversary and possess nuclear and (or) other types of weapons of mass destruction or significant combat capabilities of general purpose forces. Nuclear deterrence is also exercised toward states that provide territory, air and (or) sea space under their control, as well as resources for preparing and committing aggression against the Russian Federation.

This new addition can be considered relevant to Ukraine.

politics/25/09/2024/669a1d389a79471d6b157910. – in Russian

¹⁵ Nikolai Sokov, “Russia Clarifies its Nuclear Deterrence Policy,” Vienna Center for Disarmament and Non-Proliferation, June 3, 2020, <https://vcdnp.org/russia-clarifies-its-nuclear-deterrence-policy/>.

¹⁶ Sokov, “Russia Clarifies its Nuclear Deterrence Policy.”

¹⁷ Pietkiewicz, “The Military Doctrine of the Russian Federation,” 150-151.

Article 10 states: "Aggression by any state from a military coalition (bloc, alliance) against the Russian Federation and (or) its allies is considered as the aggression by this coalition (bloc, alliance) as a whole."

Article 11 states: "Aggression against the Russian Federation and (or) its allies by any non-nuclear state with the participation or support of a nuclear state is considered as their joint attack."¹⁸

In this context, it can be concluded that the 2024 doctrine reflects a sharper, more assertive nuclear discourse than its predecessor.

In the 2020 document, Article 15 claims "rationality of the structure and composition of nuclear deterrent forces and means, as well as their maintenance at a level minimally sufficient to fulfil the assigned tasks." However, in the 2024 doctrine (Article 16), the word "minimally" disappeared. Also, the statement in 2020 on "compliance with international arms control obligations" was removed in 2024. The shift in wording from "minimally sufficient" to merely "sufficient" could signal a more flexible, far-reaching approach to nuclear deterrence, meaning Russia would no longer limit its nuclear forces to the minimum. These unambiguous revisions may indicate a clear weakening of Russia's commitment to international arms control agreements.

In 2020, Article 15(c) called for "adaptability of nuclear deterrence to military threats." In 2024, the text reads: "adaptability of nuclear deterrence to military risks and threats." The reference to "risks" underscores that nuclear deterrence can be adapted not only to specific military threats but also to broader risks. This may be interpreted as broadening the deterrence strategy in 2024.¹⁹

Article 17 of the 2020 doctrine states: "The Russian Federation reserves the right to use nuclear weapons in response to the use of nuclear weapons and other weapons of mass destruction against it and (or) its allies, as well as in the case of aggression against the Russian Federation with the use of conventional weapons, when the very existence of the state is threatened." In 2024 this article (Article 18) was changed as follows: "The Russian Federation reserves the right to employ nuclear weapons in response to the employment of nuclear and (or) other types of weapons of mass destruction against itself and (or) its allies, as well as in the event of aggression against the Russian Federation and (or) the Republic of Belarus as participants in the Union State with the employment of conventional weapons, which creates a critical threat to their sovereignty and (or) territorial integrity." Thus, a special emphasis on Belarus was added in 2024.

¹⁸ Decree of the President of the Russian Federation dated June 2, 2020 No. 355 "On the Fundamentals of the State Policy of the Russian Federation in the Field of Nuclear Deterrence," <http://www.kremlin.ru/acts/bank/45562>; "Fundamentals of State Policy of the Russian Federation on Nuclear Deterrence, Approved by the Executive Order of the President of the Russian Federation No. 991 of November 19, 2024," Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, December 3, 2024, https://www.mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/international_safety/1434131/.

¹⁹ Decree of the President of the Russian Federation dated June 2, 2020, No. 355; "Fundamentals of State Policy of the Russian Federation on Nuclear Deterrence."

Additionally, the threshold for the use of nuclear arms has been lowered from a threat to the state's existence in 2020 to a critical threat to its sovereignty and/or territorial integrity in 2024.²⁰

When comparing the 2024 doctrine with the 2020 doctrine, there are some additions regarding "the conditions determining the possibility of the Russian Federation using nuclear weapons" (Article 19 in both doctrines):

- d) Aggression against the Russian Federation and (or) the Republic of Belarus as members of the Union State with the employment of conventional weapons, which creates a critical threat to their sovereignty and (or) territorial integrity;
- e) Receipt of reliable data on the massive launch (take-off) of air and space attack means (strategic and tactical aircraft, cruise missiles, unmanned, hypersonic and other aerial vehicles) and their crossing of the state border of the Russian Federation.²¹

With these new additions, it can be assessed that the inclusion of Belarus in the doctrine represents both a special emphasis and an extension of the conditions for the use of nuclear arms. The post-2020 changes have made Russia's nuclear doctrine both militarily and politically more expansive and adaptable, aligning it with geopolitical and technological developments.²²

Main Factors Driving the 2024 Changes of Russia's Nuclear Doctrine

Although the impact of the international environment on nuclear decision-making is frequently emphasized, the role of domestic politics in this process also cannot be ignored. For instance, Sagan argues that domestic factors, along with normative elements, are as influential as environmental concerns in a state's decision on nuclear armaments.²³ Elisabeth Saunders likewise emphasizes the importance of domestic dynamics in explaining nuclear choices.²⁴

In this context, the main reasons driving the revision of Moscow's nuclear doctrine in November 2024, which outlines the purpose and conditions under which Russia would use its nuclear weapons, can be attributed to both structural and domestic political factors. When evaluated in the context of Russia's military aggression against Ukraine since 2022, the primary structural reason for the shift in Russia's official stance on the use of nuclear capabilities is to prevent rival nuclear powers—supporting Ukraine either individually or through international

²⁰ Decree of the President of the Russian Federation dated June 2, 2020, No. 355.

²¹ "Fundamentals of State Policy of the Russian Federation on Nuclear Deterrence."

²² Decree of the President of the Russian Federation dated June 2, 2020, No. 355; "Fundamentals of State Policy of the Russian Federation on Nuclear Deterrence."

²³ Scott D. Sagan, "Why Do States Build Nuclear Weapons? Three Models in Search of a Bomb," *International Security* 21, no. 3 (1997): 54-86, <https://doi.org/10.1162/isec.2.1.3.54>.

²⁴ Elisabeth N. Saunders, "The Domestic Politics of Nuclear Choices – A Review Essay," *International Security* 44, no. 2 (2019): 146-184, https://doi.org/10.1162/isec_a_00361.

organizations—from directly intervening in the war and to curtail their indirect military assistance to Ukraine. The statements by Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Sergei Ryabkov on this issue, even before the official revision of the doctrine, suggest that the changes to the doctrine were intended to serve this purpose. Prior to the announcement of the new doctrine, Ryabkov told the state media outlet TASS that, based on the West's actions related to Russia's military operation in Ukraine, Moscow would amend its nuclear doctrine.²⁵ As mentioned earlier, the revised document's statement that "Aggression against the Russian Federation and (or) its allies by any non-nuclear state with the participation or support of a nuclear state is considered as their joint attack"²⁶ clearly reflects these strategic concerns of the Russian authorities.

However, since the start of the war in Ukraine, the Kremlin has frequently stated that nuclear weapons are ready for use at any moment. For instance, Putin referred to nuclear weapons at the outset of the war by stating, "So, I order to move Russia's deterrence forces to a special regime of combat duty,"²⁷ thereby raising the perceived likelihood of nuclear use. In this context, it is important to question why the Russian government—which has not hesitated to employ nuclear rhetoric from the beginning to protect national interests and deter third-party intervention—felt the need to formalize this posture as an official political approach at this stage.

It is argued that recent developments in the regions where Russia has intervened have contributed to lowering the nuclear threshold, fostering a perception in Moscow that "Russia's nuclear deterrence could be challenged by the US and NATO forces, particularly in Ukraine." For example, Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky stated that Ukraine's incursion into Russia's Kursk region demonstrates that Kremlin threats of retaliation are a bluff.²⁸ However, it is also possible that Moscow made this change as part of an effort to bolster its influence in domestic politics.

John Orme argues that, with regard to the credibility of deterrence, danger only occurs when the defender is unable or unwilling to fulfill its obligations, or when it is strong and resolute but fails to demonstrate this to its opponent.²⁹ In

²⁵ Mikhail Klimentyev, "Russia's Deputy Foreign Minister Spoke about Changes to the Country's Nuclear Doctrine," *RTVI*, September 1, 2024, <https://rtvi.com/news/zamglavy-mid-rossii-rasskazal-ob-izmeneniyah-v-yadernoj-doktrine-strany/>. – in Russian

²⁶ Frances Mao, "Putin Proposes New Rules for Using Nuclear Weapons," *BBC News*, September 26, 2024, <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/c5yjej0rvw0o>.

²⁷ Shannon Bugos, "Putin Orders Russian Nuclear Weapons on Higher Alert," Arms Control Association, March 2022, www.armscontrol.org/act/2022-03/news/putin-orders-russian-nuclear-weapons-higher-alert.

²⁸ Warren Murray, "Ukraine War Briefing: Kursk Proves Putin's Red Lines Are Bluff, Says Zelenskiy," *The Guardian*, August 20, 2024, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/article/2024/aug/20/ukraine-war-briefing-kursk-proves-putins-red-lines-are-bluff-says-zelenskiy>.

²⁹ John Orme, "Deterrence Failures: A Second Look," *International Security* 11, no. 4 (1987): 96-124, <https://muse.jhu.edu/article/446318>.

this context, one development that could undermine the credibility of Russia's deterrent forces is the ongoing situation on the ground in Ukraine. Recent battlefield dynamics reveal that Russia—having attempted to intimidate Kyiv through its de facto occupation of Ukrainian territories—is now encountering effective Ukrainian counteroffensives. For instance, Russia was forced to evacuate several settlements as a result of Ukraine's counterattack on the Kursk region.³⁰ Moreover, Ukraine's counterattacks are effective not only within Russian-controlled territory but also in countries such as Sudan and Syria, where Russian-affiliated forces operate.³¹

These developments have called into question Russia's conventional military forces. As is well known, the deterrence policies of nuclear-weapon states are based on a strategic approach comprising two pillars: their nuclear strike forces and their offensive-defensive conventional capabilities. If one of these pillars weakens or is perceived as weak, the other pillar must come to the fore or be demonstrated as strong to maintain deterrence. Given that deterrence depends on convincing opponents not to engage in damaging actions, a situation in which the actor's deterrent power has weakened may leave it in an undesirable position. In such a context, one expects the actor to demonstrate the strongest capabilities supporting deterrence, both rhetorically and in action. Regarding this point, Wachs claims that the Russian elites use nuclear rhetoric to pressure Ukraine into stopping its counterattack.³²

The recent advancements of Ukrainian forces at certain points, the failure of the Russian military to achieve its desired objectives, and Russia's inability to prevent further Ukrainian strikes in regions such as the Middle East due to limitations in its conventional military capabilities prompted Russia to emphasize its nuclear forces. In this environment, to convince other countries of the strength of its deterrence strategy—particularly its nuclear component—Russia has not only made doctrinal changes that lower the threshold for the use of nuclear weapons but has also actively showcased its nuclear military capabilities through exercises. In fact, just two weeks before the official announcement of the doctrine, Russia conducted a very comprehensive military drill involving its nuclear forces.³³

Another key development that prompted Russia to officially strengthen its deterrent posture was the U.S. decision to greenlight Ukraine's use of long-range

³⁰ Francesca Gillett, "Russia Widens Evacuations to Second Border Region after Ukraine Offensive," *BBC News*, August 12, 2024, www.bbc.com/news/articles/ceq59l90wevo.

³¹ David Kirichenko, "Ukraine Is Taking the Fight to Russia in Africa, Syria," *The Hill* (blog), July 2, 2024, <https://thehill.com/opinion/international/4749817-ukraine-fights-russia-africa/>.

³² Wachs, "Russian Nuclear Roulette? Elites and Public Debates on Nuclear Weapons," 194.

³³ "Russia's Putin Launches Drill of Nuclear Forces Simulating Strikes," *Al Jazeera*, October 29, 2024, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2024/10/29/putin-launches-drill-of-nuclear-forces-simulating-retaliatory-strikes>.

missiles on targets within Russian territory.³⁴ Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov stated that Ukraine's use of non-nuclear Western missiles against Russia, as outlined in the revised doctrine, could lead to a nuclear response.³⁵ Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky has long sought permission to strike targets deep inside Russia with Western weapons. In response to this request, President Joe Biden lifted the ban on using ATACMS tactical ballistic missiles to attack Russian territory. In response, Russia has revised its nuclear doctrine, effectively updating it to align with the new situation.³⁶

This development caused unease for Russia, both on the battlefield and in the eyes of the international community. Russia possesses highly advanced conventional air-defense systems, particularly for protecting its homeland. However, if ballistic missiles were to bypass these defense systems and strike targets on Russian soil, causing significant damage to Russian troops, that would not only undermine Russia's deterrence strategy but could also shift the course of the war in Ukraine's favor. Another reflection of this situation is that Russia's status as a great power is being questioned by both its opponents and allies. In other words, the failure of deterrence—which aims to instill confidence in allies and fear in adversaries—would negatively affect Russia's image among both its foes and allies. To prevent such a situation, Moscow might strengthen the nuclear dimension of deterrence, not only rhetorically but also through concrete actions, and make this more explicit in official political discourse.

Another important change in the new nuclear doctrine is the emphasis on Belarus, which indirectly participated in the Ukraine war. As previously mentioned, within the doctrine's defense section concerning nuclear weapons, the name of Belarus is specifically highlighted. This change is anticipated to strengthen the extended nuclear deterrence strategy, which aims to protect Belarus to a significant extent. The credibility of the security guarantee provided to a non-nuclear ally is one of the most important pillars of the extended nuclear deterrence strategy. This strategy is defined as a security guarantee established by a nuclear-weapon state, based on its military capabilities, including its nuclear weapons, to protect a non-nuclear-weapon state it defines as an ally from the undesired actions of third parties.

Credibility is a key feature of deterrence in general, but it is particularly important in the context of extended nuclear deterrence, where the state threatening retaliation does not face direct threats to its own territory.³⁷ Viewed within

³⁴ "Biden Says 'Working' on Ukraine Use of US Long-Range Weapons inside Russia," *Al Jazeera*, September 11, 2024, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2024/9/11/biden-says-working-on-ukraine-use-of-us-long-range-weapons-inside-russia>.

³⁵ "Putin Approves Updated Russian Nuclear Doctrine Following Biden's Missile Decision," *BBC News* (Russian Service), October 19, 2024, <https://www.bbc.com/russian/articles/cx2l4wzkl0lo>.

³⁶ "Putin Approves Updated Russian Nuclear Doctrine."

³⁷ Andrew O'Neil, *Asia, the US and Extended Nuclear Deterrence: Atomic Umbrellas in the Twenty-First Century* (London/New York: Routledge, 2013), 15.

this framework, the extension of the nuclear doctrine strengthens the reliability of the nuclear security umbrella Russia has directly formed over Belarus, which has supported Russia since the beginning of the Ukraine war. Indeed, as part of the nuclear deterrence strategy, Russian President Vladimir Putin announced on June 16, 2023, that Russian nuclear warheads had already been deployed in Belarus. The new doctrine reinforces this strategy. Furthermore, after the doctrine's publication, Russia and Belarus signed a security guarantee agreement.³⁸

In addition to security concerns, Russia's nuclear weapons also serve its ambition for great-power status in the international system.³⁹ Undoubtedly, after President Trump comes to power in the United States in 2025, one important area where confrontation with the United States and China will intensify will be nuclear armament. In this context, another structural factor pushing Russia to change its nuclear posture is its desire to assert its status in global competition by emphasizing its military capacity and reaffirming its strategic importance.

Domestic political factors are also among the reasons Russia is moving toward renewing its nuclear doctrine, which describes its roadmap for the use of nuclear weapons. Putin has used nuclear rhetoric to influence public opinion and bolster his legitimacy in Russia amid weakened economic conditions stemming from falling energy prices in the late 2000s.⁴⁰ For example, before the 2018 presidential elections, Putin delivered a speech describing Russia's nuclear strike capabilities, specifically aimed at influencing Russian voters.⁴¹ As is well known, Wagner, a mercenary group that has fought as a significant military force alongside Russian troops in both the Ukraine war and the conflicts in Syria, attempted a mutiny against President Putin's administration in June 2024.⁴² Although the uprising was unsuccessful, this attempt weakened the government's image both domestically and internationally.⁴³ For instance, German Chancellor Olaf Scholz said the Wagner mercenary group's mutiny had weakened Vladimir Putin.⁴⁴

³⁸ Burc Eryugur, "Russia, Belarus Sign Mutual Security Guarantees Agreement," *Anadolu Agency*, December 6, 2024, <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/world/russia-belarus-sign-mutual-security-guarantees-agreement/3416560>.

³⁹ Anya Loukianova Fink and Olga Oliker, "Russia's Nuclear Weapons in a Multipolar World: Guarantors of Sovereignty, Great Power Status & More," *Dædalus* 149, no. 2 (2020): 37-55, https://doi.org/10.1162/daed_a_01788.

⁴⁰ Elias Götz, "Strategic Imperatives, Status Aspirations, or Domestic Interests? Explaining Russia's Nuclear Weapons Policy," *International Politics* 56 (2019): 810-827, 821, <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41311-018-0168-7>.

⁴¹ Steven Pifer, "Putin on the Nukes," The Brookings Institution, March 2, 2018, <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/putin-on-the-nukes/>.

⁴² "What We Know about Russia's Wagner Mutiny," *The Straits Times*, June 25, 2023, www.straitstimes.com/world/europe/what-we-know-about-russias-wagner-mutiny.

⁴³ Peter Rutland, "Wagner's Mutiny Punctured Putin's 'Strongman' Image and Exposed Cracks in His Rule," *The Conversation*, June 25, 2023, <http://theconversation.com/wagners-mutiny-punctured-putins-strongman-image-and-exposed-cracks-in-his-rule-208430>.

⁴⁴ Graham Russell, "Wagner Mutiny Shows 'Cracks' in Russia, Says Scholz, as Putin Makes

Moreover, another development that raises questions about the government's authority is the failure to achieve the desired results on the front lines in Ukraine. Public support for the war in Ukraine has declined, despite the Kremlin's strong propaganda and the fear of punishment for expressing opposition, particularly when those returning from the front reveal the harsh war realities.⁴⁵ Nuclear doctrines not only remind external actors that the weapons with the highest destructive capability are in the government's hands but also demonstrate to the public, supporters, and opposition its responsibility to control this power. Holst argues that the symbolic importance of specific weapons and deployments affects the cost of any restructuring needed to strengthen credible deterrence, and that defensive postures and doctrines can shape the conditions of political order.⁴⁶

In this context, the revised nuclear doctrine, which lowers the nuclear threshold, is also viewed as part of the government's policies to consolidate its power domestically. In this regard, for instance, Nicole Grajewski from the Carnegie Endowment stated that this official update of the nuclear doctrine by the Russian government created uncertainty about the use of nuclear weapons, and that one purpose of this uncertainty was to maintain domestic stability.⁴⁷

Conclusion

Nuclear doctrines are official documents and/or discourses that outline the purposes, conditions, and scenarios under which nuclear-weapon states may use their nuclear capabilities. In other words, the strategic approach outlined in a nuclear doctrine demonstrates how nuclear weapons—regarded as the most destructive weapons—are integrated into the state's security framework. Russia, the country with the largest stockpile of nuclear weapons, revised its nuclear doctrine in 2024, outlining the intended use of its nuclear capabilities.

This study analyzes the changes to Russia's recently published nuclear doctrine and the underlying reasons for them. In this new doctrine, published in the context of Russia's military occupation of and aggression against Ukraine since 2022, any attack on Russia renders not only the aggressor but also any nuclear-weapon state or states supporting the attacker potential targets for Russia's nuclear forces. Another important detail in the new doctrine is the direct place-

Rare Outing," *The Guardian*, June 29, 2023, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2023/jun/29/wagner-mutiny-has-weakened-putin-says-scholz-as-russian-president-makes-rare-public-visit>.

⁴⁵ Vadim Shtepa, "Public Opinion in Russia Falls as Citizens Experience Reality of War," *Eurasia Daily Monitor* 21, no. 129, The Jamestown Foundation, September 10, 2024, <https://jamestown.org/program/public-opinion-in-russia-falls-as-citizens-experience-reality-of-war/>.

⁴⁶ Johan Jørgen Holst, "Domestic Concerns and Nuclear Doctrine: How Should the Nuclear Posture Be Shaped?" *The Adelphi Papers* 23, no. 183 (1983): 28-42, <https://doi.org/10.1080/05679328308457434>.

⁴⁷ Grajewski, "Russia's Updated Nuclear Doctrine Isn't a Blueprint for Weapons Use."

ment of Russia's ally, Belarus, under its nuclear deterrence and defense strategy. Thus, the 2024 doctrine expands the purpose and scope of Russia's potential use of nuclear weapons.

One of the main reasons behind Russia's revision of its nuclear doctrine is that Moscow's deterrence strategy has been called into question due to the ongoing war in Ukraine. In particular, the recent failure of Moscow's conventional forces in the Ukraine war, combined with the Western powers' approval for the use by Ukraine of long-range missiles against Russian targets, has been pivotal in shifting the momentum of the war against Russia. While this situation has brought the Western powers closer to Ukraine, Moscow has prioritized a strategy centered on its nuclear weapons to counter the support for Ukraine. Another reason Moscow emphasizes its nuclear weapons is its desire to maintain stability within the domestic political order. The Wagner Group, Russia's most influential mercenary force, rebelled against Moscow, and the human and material losses incurred in the ongoing war suggest that the Russian government's power was weakening both domestically and internationally. The amendment, which emphasizes that Moscow can use the world's most destructive weapons at any time, can therefore be considered an action that also helps consolidate the government's authority.

The shift in Russia's nuclear doctrine in 2024 and the increasing rhetoric can be attributed to both external and internal factors. From an external perspective, the changes may be seen as a step that could trigger or accelerate a new nuclear arms race. Moreover, they can be interpreted as a signal of potential nuclear proliferation, both vertically and horizontally. Internally, the revised doctrine may be considered a move that could further consolidate the country's already existing authoritarian system and intensify Russian nationalism.

In conclusion, given the ongoing war in Ukraine, Russia's renewal of its nuclear doctrine in 2024 is a highly significant action that could lead to developments with potentially devastating consequences, not only regionally but globally.

Disclaimer

The opinions, findings, conclusions, and recommendations expressed in this publication are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of the Partnership for Peace Consortium, its participating institutions, or any governmental or international organizations affiliated with its governance structure.

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