



Research Article

Deterrence by Fear Inducement: Russia's Nuclear Rhetoric and the War in Ukraine

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Abstract: This article examines Russia's nuclear rhetoric during the war in Ukraine as a deliberate tool of influence rooted in the doctrine of "ustrashenie" (deterrence by fear inducement). Moving beyond classical deterrence theory, it argues that Russia employs nuclear signaling not merely to prevent escalation but to coerce adversaries psychologically, shape public perception, and fragment Western decision-making. The analysis traces the evolution of Russia's nuclear rhetoric from 2022 to 2024, highlighting how it has adapted to battlefield developments and broader geopolitical aims. By integrating ambiguity, psychological manipulation, and information warfare, Russia's strategy blurs the line between deterrence and coercion. The article assesses the strategic implications of this approach, including the risks of miscalculation, the erosion of nuclear norms, and challenges to NATO's deterrence posture. It concludes with policy recommendations focused on reinforcing psychological resilience, strategic communication, and alliance cohesion to counter the cognitive effects of nuclear intimidation in modern conflict environments.

Keywords: Russia, nuclear weapons, nuclear rhetoric, deterrence, NATO, Europe.

Introduction

Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 has been a turning point in international affairs, not only because of the re-emergence of large-scale conventional war in Europe, but also because of unprecedented and sustained nuclear rhetoric. From the early hours of the invasion, the Russian leadership employed nuclear rhetoric to shape the strategic environment, deter Western involvement, and psychologically influence Western societies. These threats, while

framed within the language of deterrence, were not solely defensive in nature. Rather, they were an integral part of a broader influence campaign aimed at undermining the resolve and decision-making capacity of the Western powers.

This article argues that Russia's use of nuclear rhetoric in Ukraine cannot be fully understood within the confines of classical deterrence theory. Instead, it is rooted in the uniquely Russian strategic doctrine of "deterrence by fear inducement" (*ustrashenie*), which seeks to coerce adversaries through ambiguity, psychological pressure, and controlled escalation. This doctrine blends military signaling, information warfare, and strategic ambiguity in pursuit of both deterrence and influence.

The analysis unfolds in five sections: 1) a theoretical and doctrinal exploration of Russian nuclear strategy; 2) an examination of "deterrence by fear inducement" as a distinct operational philosophy; 3) a chronological case study of nuclear rhetoric throughout the Ukraine war; 4) an assessment of nuclear rhetoric as part of Russia's broader influence operations; and 5) a review of the strategic and policy implications for NATO. It concludes with concrete policy recommendations aimed at reinforcing the credibility of Western resilience and deterrence in the face of nuclear intimidation. By integrating empirical data, doctrinal texts, and strategic analysis, this study aims to clarify the nature of nuclear rhetoric in the Ukraine war and identify the tools necessary to counter its destructive effects on the rules-based international order.

Nuclear Deterrence in Russia's Strategic Mindset

Since the collapse of the Soviet Union, Russia's nuclear doctrine has undergone a gradual but significant transformation, adapting to the new geopolitical environment and evolving perceptions of threats. In this process, nuclear weapons have evolved into the cornerstone of Russian national security and strategic deterrence.¹ This mindset, rooted in both historical experience and strategic calculation, has guided Russia's defense posture and foreign policy behavior for over three decades.

Unlike Western doctrines, which typically maintain a distinction between nuclear and non-nuclear instruments of influence, Russia views deterrence as a holistic concept encompassing nuclear, conventional, cyber, and informational components.² In this framework, deterrence is not just about preventing war but also about shaping the adversary's behavior across the peace-crisis-conflict continuum.

In the 1990s, Russia faced a severe decline in its conventional military capabilities. In this new reality, nuclear weapons were seen not merely as tools of last

¹ Michael Kofman and Anya Loukianova Fink, "Escalation Management and Nuclear Employment in Russian Military Strategy," *War on the Rocks*, September 19, 2022, <https://warontherocks.com/2022/09/escalation-management-and-nuclear-employment-in-russian-military-strategy-2/>.

² Kristin Ven Bruusgaard, "Russian Strategic Deterrence," *Survival* 58, no. 4 (2016): 7-26, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00396338.2016.1207945>.

resort but as critical equalizers in an asymmetric power balance with the West. As Russia's 2000 Military Doctrine explicitly stated, nuclear weapons could be used "in response to large-scale aggression using conventional weapons in situations critical to the national security of the Russian Federation."³ This signaled a shift away from the Soviet "no first use" policy toward a more flexible approach, reflecting Russia's inability to rely solely on conventional forces. Subsequent doctrinal updates have reaffirmed this position. The 2010 Military Doctrine allowed for nuclear use "when the very existence of the state is under threat,"⁴ while the 2020 document, titled "Basic Principles of State Policy of the Russian Federation on Nuclear Deterrence," further codified Russia's deterrence posture. This policy emphasized deterrence as a defensive measure intended to prevent aggression, but also outlined scenarios in which nuclear use was acceptable, including when credible intelligence suggests an imminent ballistic missile attack or when conventional aggression threatens state survival.⁵ While framed as defensive, these provisions have significant implications for crisis stability and escalation dynamics.

This policy has frequently been described as "escalate to de-escalate," a concept that envisions a broader framework of escalation control extending beyond single, tactical strikes.⁶ At the same time, it is fair to argue that this strategy aims to deter adversaries through uncertainty, fusing defense with a threshold of ambiguity.⁷ By operationalizing ambiguity, Russia views nuclear weapons as instruments to "sober" adversaries, thereby seeking to reset a deteriorating conflict and achieve favorable terms.⁸ Overall, the main aim of Russia's nuclear weapons has been to preserve regime stability and state coherence.⁹ However, as a result of Russia's underperformance in the war in Ukraine, it is now struggling to maintain its great power status. Consequently, the strategic objectives of Russia's nuclear weapons appear to be slightly shifting, becoming more integrated into influence operations rather than serving solely a traditional deterrent function.

³ "Military Doctrine of the Russian Federation," approved by Decree No. 706 of the President of the Russian Federation of April 21, 2000, <https://base.garant.ru/181993/>. – in Russian; "Russia's Military Doctrine," Arms Control Association, n.d., <https://www.armscontrol.org/act/2000-05/russias-military-doctrine>.

⁴ "Military Doctrine of the Russian Federation," President of the Russian Federation Official Website, February 5, 2010, www.kremlin.ru/supplement/461. – in Russian

⁵ *Basic Principles of State Policy of the Russian Federation on Nuclear Deterrence*, The President of the Russian Federation, June 2, 2020, <http://www.kremlin.ru/acts/bank/45562>. – in Russian; *Basic Principles of State Policy of the Russian Federation on Nuclear Deterrence*, The President of the Russian Federation, June 8, 2020, accessed December 8, 2025, https://rusmilsec.blog/wp-content/uploads/2021/08/nucdet_rf_2020_eng.pdf.

⁶ Kofman and Fink, "Escalation Management and Nuclear Employment."

⁷ Kofman and Fink, "Escalation Management and Nuclear Employment."

⁸ Kofman and Fink, "Escalation Management and Nuclear Employment."

⁹ Kofman and Fink, "Escalation Management and Nuclear Employment."

Deterrence by Fear Inducement

In 2024, Dmitry Trenin, Sergey Avakyants, and Sergey Karaganov published a book titled *From Deterrence to Intimidation: Nuclear Weapons, Geopolitics, Coalition Strategy*. According to the book's cover, the text was published on the basis of a report delivered to the Government of the Russian Federation.¹⁰ Moreover, its publication coincided with the publication of the updated document "Basic Principles of State Policy of the Russian Federation on Nuclear Deterrence" in November 2024. Thus, it is reasonable to assume that the information provided in this book reflects Russia's official approach to nuclear weapons, which significantly differs from previously known interpretations.

The main purpose of this article is to demonstrate how Russia conceptualizes nuclear weapons not primarily as instruments of military deterrence but as tools of influence operations. This argument is especially salient in the post-2022 strategic environment, in which nuclear rhetoric has become increasingly integrated into Russia's broader coercive and informational posture toward Western states. For this reason, the 2024 volume by Trenin, Avakyants, and Karaganov constitutes the only source that enables a theoretically grounded and contemporaneous conceptualization of this shift, as it was published immediately prior to the formal revision of Russia's nuclear-use policy. No other official or semi-official source substantiates so directly the central claim advanced here, namely that Russia employs nuclear weapons not in the classical deterrence sense but as instruments of strategic influence. The war in Ukraine and the selected timeframe provide the most empirically robust basis for evaluating this transformation.

That is why, for instance, Adamsky¹¹ is not directly relevant to this analysis. His work explains how Russian strategic culture conceptualizes deterrence and traces its doctrinal evolution and strategic logic. By contrast, this article explicitly reframes nuclear rhetoric as an instrument of influence operations and extends this logic into the domains of policy, societal resilience, and strategic communications. This analytical move lies outside the scope of Adamsky's work and represents a distinct contribution to the study of Russian nuclear strategy in the post-2022 security environment.

By contrast, Trenin and his co-authors¹² argue that the traditional understanding of deterrence is outdated and does not reflect modern security challenges and threat perceptions. Therefore, they contend that a new doctrine must be developed that, rather than relying solely on mutual vulnerability and the balance of terror, incorporates a more fluid, psychological approach, often

¹⁰ Dmitry V. Trenin, Sergey I. Avakyants, and Sergey A. Karaganov, *From Deterrence to Intimidation: Nuclear Weapons, Geopolitics, Coalition Strategy*, Faculty of World Economy and International Affairs, National Research University Higher School of Economics, Institute of Military Economics and Strategy (Moscow: Molodaya Gvardiya, 2024). — in Russian

¹¹ Dmitry Adamsky, *Russian Nuclear Orthodoxy: Religion, Politics, and Strategy* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2019).

¹² Trenin, Avakyants, and Karaganov, *From Deterrence to Intimidation*.

referred to as “deterrence by fear inducement” (*ustrasheniye*).¹³ Under this framework, nuclear weapons function not merely as instruments of war prevention but as mechanisms for shaping adversaries’ perceptions, constraining their political choices, and manipulating their risk calculus through calibrated intimidation.

This doctrine focuses less on material balance and more on influencing the political will and decision-making of the adversary. It is an active and dynamic strategy that combines military signaling, psychological manipulation, and cognitive warfare to achieve deterrent effects in both peacetime and conflict. The aim is not to mirror the Western model of deterrence, which rests heavily on rational actor theory and game-theoretical stability,¹⁴ but to undermine it from within through uncertainty, ambiguity, and intimidation. It prioritizes perception management and psychological pressure over mutual assured destruction. Russia’s strategy often aims to preemptively sow doubt, paralyze decision-making, and constrain adversary responses without the actual use of force. This framework is carefully constructed to induce *hesitation*, *confusion*, and *self-deterrence* among adversaries, especially Western decision-makers conditioned by the norms of rational escalation and transparency. It is a tool of proactive deterrence, not just a passive last resort.

The key components¹⁵ of *ustrashenie* include:

- *Ambiguity of thresholds*: Blurring the lines of what constitutes an unacceptable threat, thereby keeping adversaries uncertain;
- *Visibility of capabilities*: Frequent, deliberate displays of strategic systems through exercises, missile tests, and media coverage to reinforce potential consequences;
- *Declarative threats*: Public statements by political and military leaders warning of “unacceptable consequences” or “retaliatory devastation”;
- *Integration of non-nuclear tools*: The use of cyber, disinformation, and conventional threats in ways that mimic nuclear deterrence signaling, creating a layered deterrent effect.

Moreover, unlike traditional deterrence approaches, Russia views escalation as a deterrent rather than a failure of deterrence. The ultimate strategic objective of *ustrashenie* is not parity, but pressure. Russia uses this doctrine to shape the strategic environment rather than merely to respond to external actions. In this sense, deterrence by fear inducement is more offensive than defensive, be-

¹³ Trenin, Avakyan, and Karaganov, *From Deterrence to Intimidation*.

¹⁴ Bruce Bueno de Mesquita and David Lalman, *War and Reason: Domestic and International Imperatives* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1992); Frank C. Zagare, “Deterrence Theory, Then and Now: There Is No Going Back,” *St Antony’s International Review* 9, no. 1 (2013): 157-167.

¹⁵ Trenin, Avakyan, and Karaganov, *From Deterrence to Intimidation*.

cause it is about setting the rules of the game – deterring not just attacks, but entire lines of policy and strategy.

In Ukraine, Russia’s nuclear threats aimed at shaping public opinion, delaying weapons deliveries, and forcing Western governments into cautious risk calculations.¹⁶ The goal was not simply to prevent direct intervention, but to slow and fragment the West’s unified support by seeding fear, doubt, and disagreement.

Furthermore, fear inducement serves Russia’s broader geopolitical ambitions by undermining Western cohesion. As the book emphasizes, *ustrashenie* is most effective when targeted at pluralistic, democratic societies that are vulnerable to internal debate and media-driven perception. This is precisely what makes it an ideal complement to Russia’s information warfare doctrine. In this framework, nuclear rhetoric is not a last resort but a scalable, reusable instrument of influence. Its psychological power offers Russia a low-cost, high-impact way to shape outcomes even in conflicts where it may be conventionally disadvantaged.

Understanding *ustrashenie* is therefore essential for crafting a more resilient Western deterrence and influence strategy. It is not enough to counter missiles; we must also counter the mental model of deterrence that underpins Russia’s approach.

Russia’s Nuclear Rhetoric in Ukraine: February 2022 –2024

From the beginning of Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, nuclear rhetoric has been a persistent, calculated element of the Kremlin’s strategy. This section outlines key phases of nuclear signaling during the war, illustrating how rhetorical escalations have aligned with battlefield developments, sought to deter NATO involvement, and fracture transatlantic cohesion.

Phase I: Initial Invasion and Immediate Nuclear Signaling (Feb–July 2022)

Russia’s invasion on February 24, 2022, was accompanied by an extraordinary nuclear posture. In his address justifying the invasion, President Vladimir Putin declared that any external interference would invite consequences “greater than any you have faced in history.”¹⁷ Within days, Russia’s Strategic Deterrence Forces were placed on high alert, a move designed to signal resolve to Western capitals and dissuade direct NATO intervention.¹⁸ This nuclear signaling was reinforced through state-controlled media and military demonstrations, including high-profile exercises involving nuclear-capable systems. The early use of nuclear rhetoric served not only as strategic deterrence but also as a psychological

¹⁶ Trenin, Avakyan, and Karaganov, *From Deterrence to Intimidation*.

¹⁷ Vladimir Putin, “Address by the President of the Russian Federation,” *Official Website of the President of Russia*, February 21, 2022, <https://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/67828>.

¹⁸ Heather Williams et al., “Russian Nuclear Calibration in the War in Ukraine,” Brief, Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), February 23, 2024, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/russian-nuclear-calibration-war-ukraine>.

weapon to influence Western public opinion and policy debates.¹⁹ The threat was not necessarily calibrated for battlefield advantage, but rather to elevate the perceived cost of escalation and to give Russia operational space.

As Ukraine began receiving substantial Western military aid in the spring and summer of 2022, Russia intensified its warnings. Russian officials labeled NATO assistance a “proxy war,”²⁰ implicitly expanding the scope of potential nuclear response beyond direct attacks on Russian territory.^{21,22,23}

Phase II: Reversals on the Battlefield and Heightened Threats (August–October 2022)

As the war progressed, Ukrainian forces launched successful counteroffensives, notably in Kharkiv and Kherson. These battlefield setbacks corresponded with a sharper rhetorical edge from Russian leaders. In September, following illegal referendums in four Ukrainian regions, President Putin vowed to use “all means available” to protect Russian territorial integrity, which was widely interpreted as a veiled nuclear threat.²⁴

Later, Russia's Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu claimed that Ukraine was planning to detonate a “dirty bomb,” a false-flag narrative rejected by Western intelligence but one that sowed confusion and bolstered domestic narratives of existential threat.²⁵ Russia's aim was to blur the line between conventional and nuclear conflict and to prepare the Russian public for the potential use of tactical nuclear weapons should battlefield losses continue.²⁶

At this time, analysts debated the real risk of nuclear use. U.S. officials reportedly considered the possibility serious, with intelligence assessments raising con-

¹⁹ Williams et al., “Russian Nuclear Calibration in the War in Ukraine.”

²⁰ Sergey Lavrov, quoted in “Russia Accuses NATO of ‘Proxy War’ in Ukraine as US Hosts Crucial Defence Summit,” *The Guardian*, April 26, 2022, www.theguardian.com/world/2022/apr/26/russia-accuses-nato-of-proxy-war-in-ukraine-as-us-hosts-crucial-defence-summit

²¹ “Military Doctrine of the Russian Federation,” approved by Decree No. 706 of the President of the Russian Federation of April 21, 2000.

²² “Military Doctrine of the Russian Federation,” President of the Russian Federation Official Website, February 5, 2010.

²³ *Basic Principles of State Policy of the Russian Federation on Nuclear Deterrence*, 2020.

²⁴ Nick Schiffrin and Zeba Warsi, “Putin Vows to Defend Illegally Seized Regions in Ukraine by ‘All Available Means,’” *PBS News*, September 30, 2022, www.pbs.org/newshour/show/putin-vows-to-defend-illegally-seized-regions-in-ukraine-by-all-available-means.

²⁵ Paul Adams, “Russian Dirty Bomb Claims ‘Feel Like Scare Tactics,’” *BBC*, October 26, 2022, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-63390210>.

²⁶ Michal Smetana and Michal Onderco, “‘Hope the Russians Love Their Children Too’: Russian Public Support for the Use of Nuclear Weapons after the Invasion of Ukraine,” *Journal of Global Security Studies* 10, no. 3 (September 2025): ogaf012, <https://doi.org/10.1093/jogss/ogaf012>.

cerns that tactical nuclear weapons could be employed out of desperation.²⁷ Meanwhile, NATO maintained its posture but refrained from crossing any red lines perceived as provoking Russian escalation.²⁸

Phase III: Institutionalizing Ambiguity and Doctrinal Shifts (November 2022–July 2023)

Following Ukraine's liberation of Kherson in November 2022,²⁹ Russia moved to codify and normalize its nuclear rhetoric. Key developments included the suspension of Russia's participation in the New START Treaty in early 2023 and the de-ratification of the Comprehensive Nuclear-Test-Ban Treaty.³⁰ These symbolic steps served to emphasize Russia's strategic independence and break from arms control regimes seen as constraining its maneuverability.

Most notably, in March 2023, Putin announced the deployment of tactical nuclear weapons to Belarus, marking the first time since the Cold War that Russian nuclear arms were stationed outside its territory.³¹ While the move was portrayed as a defensive measure, it constituted a major escalation in force posture and brought nuclear threats closer to NATO borders. Russian nuclear exercises increased in frequency and visibility during this phase, often simulating limited nuclear strikes in response to NATO scenarios. These drills, amplified by state media, sought to condition both domestic and foreign audiences to view nuclear employment as a plausible tool within the conflict spectrum.³²

Phase IV: Strategic Display and Threshold Lowering (Nov – Dec 2024)

The most dramatic episode in this rhetorical timeline came in late 2024. On November 21, Russia conducted a high-profile launch of an intermediate-range ballistic missile, the *Oreshnik*, which struck targets near Dnipro.³³ Though not a nu-

²⁷ William J. Burns, quoted in: Jacob Knutson, "CIA Director: U.S. Can't 'Take Lightly' Russian Nuclear Threat in Ukraine," *Axios*, April 15, 2022, www.axios.com/2022/04/15/cia-director-russia-nuclear-weapons-ukraine.

²⁸ "Press Conference by NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg Previewing the Extraordinary Summit of NATO Heads of State and Government," NATO, March 23, 2022, <https://www.nato.int/en/news-and-events/events/transcripts/2022/03/23/press-conference>.

²⁹ Tom Balmforth, "In Newly Liberated Kherson, Ukrainians Celebrate but Worry About What's Next," *Reuters*, November 19, 2022, www.reuters.com/world/europe/newly-liberated-kherson-ukrainians-celebrate-worry-about-whats-next-2022-11-17/.

³⁰ Bureau of Arms Control and Nonproliferation, *2023 Report to Congress on Implementation of the New START Treaty*, U.S. Department of State, January 31, 2024, www.state.gov/bureau-of-arms-control-deterrence-and-stability/releases/2024/01/2023-report-to-congress-on-implementation-of-the-new-start-treaty.

³¹ James Gregory, "Putin: Russia to Station Nuclear Weapons in Belarus," *BBC News*, March 26, 2023, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-65077687>.

³² Gregory, "Putin: Russia to Station Nuclear Weapons in Belarus."

³³ Anastasiia Malenko, Tom Balmforth, and Max Hunder, "Russia Fired New Ballistic Missile at Ukraine, Putin Says," *Reuters*, November 22, 2024, www.reuters.com/

clear strike, its strategic characteristics and public framing marked a clear attempt to demonstrate capability and resolve.

On November 19, President Putin signed a revised nuclear doctrine that further lowered the threshold for nuclear use. The revised text emphasized the right to respond with nuclear weapons to conventional aggression supported by nuclear-capable states. It reaffirmed Russia's commitment to defending its territorial integrity by any means necessary.³⁴

NATO and U.S. responses were immediate but measured. The U.S. Department of State condemned the changes as "escalatory and destabilizing," reaffirming that the American nuclear posture remained unchanged.³⁵ European officials,³⁶ meanwhile, expressed concern that these developments reflected an entrenched Russian strategy of nuclear blackmail rather than momentary saber-rattling.

By December, Russia had formalized a nuclear deployment agreement with Belarus, effectively forward-stationing its tactical arsenal closer to NATO's eastern flank. President Alexander Lukashenko publicly embraced the arrangement, portraying it as a collective defense mechanism.³⁷ This represented the culmination of two years of rhetorical escalation, doctrinal manipulation, and strategic messaging.

Nuclear Rhetoric as a Tool of Russia's Influence Operations

Russia's use of nuclear rhetoric in the war against Ukraine transcends traditional deterrence logic.³⁸ While the primary purpose of nuclear signaling has historically been to dissuade adversaries from initiating strategic conflict, Moscow's nuclear discourse since 2022 has served a broader strategic objective: it has become a deliberate component of its influence operations.³⁹ By weaponizing fear and uncertainty, Russia seeks not only to deter NATO involvement but also to degrade Western resolve, fracture allied unity, and manipulate domestic audi-

world/europe/russia-launches-intercontinental-ballistic-missile-attack-ukraine-kyiv-says-2024-11-21/.

³⁴ "Decree of the President of the Russian Federation on Approval of the Fundamentals of State Policy of the Russian Federation in the Field of Nuclear Deterrence," President of the Russian Federation Official Site, November 19, 2024, <http://www.kremlin.ru/acts/bank/51312>. – in Russian

³⁵ Matthew Miller, "Department Press Briefing – November 19, 2024," U.S. Department of State, <https://2021-2025.state.gov/briefings/departments-press-briefing-november-19-2024/>.

³⁶ "Reaction to Putin's Approval of a New Russian Nuclear Doctrine," *Reuters*, November 20, 2024, <https://www.reuters.com/world/reaction-putins-approval-new-russian-nuclear-doctrine-2024-11-20/>.

³⁷ "Lukashenko Confirms Belarus Has Nuclear Weapons," *TASS*, December 10, 2024, <https://tass.com/world/1885201>.

³⁸ Adamsky, *Russian Nuclear Orthodoxy: Religion, Politics, and Strategy*, 223-230.

³⁹ Williams et al., "Russian Nuclear Calibration in the War in Ukraine."

ences in democratic societies.⁴⁰ In this context, nuclear rhetoric functions as both a military threat and a cognitive tool of coercion.⁴¹

From Deterrence to Strategic Influence

Classical deterrence theory posits that the threat of unacceptable retaliation prevents adversaries from initiating aggression.⁴² Russia has adopted this framework but fused it with what scholars have termed “coercive signaling”⁴³ or “deterrence by fear inducement.”⁴⁴ In the Ukrainian context, Russia has employed nuclear rhetoric not solely to prevent a NATO strike on Russian forces but to influence the strategic calculus of Western governments and publics.

The persistent threat of nuclear escalation, whether implied through doctrinal statements, veiled references in speeches, or operational drills, has shaped the tempo and scale of Western military assistance to Ukraine. In early 2022, NATO’s reluctance to impose a no-fly zone or deliver certain advanced weapons systems was attributed, in part, to fears of nuclear escalation.⁴⁵ Though assistance eventually increased, Russia’s rhetorical strategy succeeded in introducing hesitation into Western decision-making, particularly during key moments of the conflict, such as Ukraine’s counteroffensives in Kharkiv and Kherson.

Strategic Ambiguity and Doctrinal Manipulation

Central to Russia’s nuclear influence strategy is strategic ambiguity,⁴⁶ which is a calculated lack of clarity about when and under what circumstances nuclear weapons might be used.⁴⁷ This ambiguity creates psychological uncertainty for decision-makers, complicating NATO’s ability to predict escalation thresholds. For example, the revised 2024 Russian nuclear doctrine⁴⁸ suggested that even conventional attacks “facilitated” by nuclear-armed states could trigger a nu-

⁴⁰ Katarzyna Zysk, “Escalation and Nuclear Weapons in Russia’s Military Strategy,” *RUSI Journal* 163, no. 2 (2018): 6-9, www.rusi.org/explore-our-research/publications/rusi-journal/escalation-and-nuclear-weapons-russias-military-strategy.

⁴¹ Adamsky, *Russian Nuclear Orthodoxy: Religion, Politics, and Strategy*, 223-230.

⁴² Thomas C. Schelling, *Arms and Influence* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1966).

⁴³ Zysk, “Escalation and Nuclear Weapons in Russia’s Military Strategy.”

⁴⁴ Trenin, Avakants, and Karaganov, *From Deterrence to Intimidation*.

⁴⁵ Heather Williams, “Why Russia Is Changing Its Nuclear Doctrine Now,” Commentary, Center for Strategic and International Studies, September 27, 2024, www.csis.org/analysis/why-russia-changing-its-nuclear-doctrine-now.

⁴⁶ Charlie Hancock, “Russia’s New Nuclear Doctrine Takes Advantage of Ambiguity,” *The Moscow Times*, November 19, 2024, <https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2024/11/19/russias-new-nuclear-doctrine-takes-advantage-of-ambiguity-a87072>; Maxim Starchak, “Is Russia’s Nuclear Doctrine Worth the Paper It’s Written On?” Carnegie Russia Eurasia Center, November 25, 2024, <https://carnegieendowment.org/russia-eurasia/politika/2024/11/russia-new-nuclear-threat>.

⁴⁷ Kofman and Fink, “Escalation Management and Nuclear Employment.”

⁴⁸ “Decree of the President of the Russian Federation on Approval of the Fundamentals of State Policy of the Russian Federation in the Field of Nuclear Deterrence,” 2024.

clear response. This formulation blurred the lines between direct aggression and indirect support,⁴⁹ effectively treating U.S. and NATO arms deliveries to Ukraine as a potential *casus belli*.

By exploiting doctrinal ambiguity, Russia expands the reach of its deterrence posture while preserving plausible deniability.⁵⁰ This allows Moscow to maintain pressure on the West without committing to irreversible escalatory steps.⁵¹ It also compels NATO strategists to prepare for a wider range of contingencies, thereby increasing strategic costs and sowing division among allies with varying threat perceptions.

Media Campaigns and Psychological Signaling

Russian state media has played an instrumental role in amplifying nuclear rhetoric for both domestic and international audiences. Television programs such as *60 Minutes* and *Solovyov Live* have featured simulations of nuclear strikes on European capitals, accompanied by commentary emphasizing Russia's ability to annihilate the West.⁵² These displays are not merely propagandistic bluster; they are deliberately constructed to shape threat perception and feed narratives of inevitable confrontation.

For international audiences, especially in the West, such media outputs aim to exploit existing societal fears of nuclear war and undermine support for continued engagement in Ukraine. During moments of escalatory tension, like the March 2023 deployment of tactical nuclear weapons to Belarus, media outlets framed the move as both a legitimate defensive measure and a reminder of Russia's destructive potential.⁵³ This duality serves to reinforce Russia's posture as both victim and aggressor, making it harder for external observers to categorize its intentions and calibrate an appropriate response.

Psychologically, the repeated invocation of nuclear threats contributes to escalating fatigue in Western populations. Over time, this fatigue can translate into public pressure on governments to de-escalate or reduce military support, which is one of the central goals of Russian influence operations.

Disinformation and Perception Management

Beyond overt messaging, Russia has employed disinformation campaigns to reinforce its nuclear narrative. False claims that Ukraine was developing nuclear weapons or preparing to use a "dirty bomb" were intended not only to justify

⁴⁹ Hans M. Kristensen, Matt Korda, and Eliana Johns, "Russian Nuclear Weapons, 2023," *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists* 79, no. 3 (2023): 174-199, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00963402.2023.2202542>.

⁵⁰ Adamsky, *Russian Nuclear Orthodoxy: Religion, Politics, and Strategy*, 223-230.

⁵¹ Kofman and Fink, "Escalation Management and Nuclear Employment."

⁵² Gavin Briggs, "Russia's Misinformation Campaign during Wartime," *Journal of Information Warfare* 22, no. 1 (2023): 32-43.

⁵³ Kristensen, Korda, and Johns, "Russian Nuclear Weapons, 2023."

Russian actions but also to cast Ukraine and its allies as reckless escalators.⁵⁴ Such claims were echoed by official channels and pro-Kremlin actors across social media platforms,⁵⁵ feeding conspiracy theories and disorienting public understanding of the conflict.

These narratives are designed to erode the moral clarity of the Western position. If Ukraine is perceived as posing a nuclear or radiological threat, even falsely, Western publics may become more ambivalent about supporting it. Moreover, portraying NATO as a nuclear aggressor allows Russia to deflect scrutiny from its own behavior and muddy the waters of attribution and responsibility.

Such disinformation also targets non-Western audiences. In countries of the Global South, where skepticism of Western policy remains high, Russian narratives gain traction, particularly when framed as resistance to U.S.-led militarism.⁵⁶ By undermining international solidarity with Ukraine, Russia seeks to reduce its diplomatic isolation and strengthen alternative blocs sympathetic to its framing of the conflict.

Internal Disruption and the Erosion of Consensus

Perhaps most critically, Russia's nuclear rhetoric functions to disrupt internal consensus within NATO and the European Union. Divergent national threat perceptions between countries such as Poland and the Baltic States, on one side, and Germany or France, on the other, can be exacerbated by calculated Russian threats. For example, when Russia issued warnings about retaliatory strikes in response to long-range missile deliveries, some governments hesitated, fearing escalation, while others advocated a firmer stance.

This disparity reflects the effectiveness of nuclear rhetoric in injecting uncertainty into alliance politics. Russia's goal is not to provoke open conflict with NATO, but to keep it perpetually reactive, hesitant, and divided. The longer Western nations debate whether an action "crosses a red line," the more time Russia buys to consolidate its military and political objectives in Ukraine.

Additionally, the Kremlin targets domestic opposition within democratic societies. Far-right and far-left parties across Europe, as well as isolationist voices

⁵⁴ Iuliia Hoban and Alex Rister, "Nuclear Anxiety as an Instrument of War: The Use of News Media to Shape and Respond to the Disinformation Campaign Surrounding the Zaporizhzhia Nuclear Power Plant," *Media, War & Conflict* 18, no. 1 (2024): 140-158, <https://doi.org/10.1177/17506352241256575>.

⁵⁵ Neville Bolt et al., *Kremlin Communication Strategy for Russian Audiences Before and After the Full-Scale Invasion of Ukraine* (Riga, Latvia: NATO Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence, October 2023), <https://stratcomcoe.org/publications/kremlin-communication-strategy-for-russian-audiences-before-and-after-the-full-scale-invasion-of-ukraine/293>.

⁵⁶ Megi Benia, "Russia's Disinformation and the War in Ukraine," UGSP Analytical Paper Series (Tbilisi: UG Security Platform, July 2023), 1-9, <https://ugsp.ug.edu.ge/storage/publications/July2023/XUH1lhqyGGNZmvUyam1B.pdf>.

in the United States, frequently cite nuclear risks as justification for reducing support for Ukraine.⁵⁷ These positions are often amplified by Russian media and social media proxies, deepening political polarization and undermining elite consensus.

Influence, Not Deterrence: Redefining the Purpose of Nuclear Signaling

Taken together, these techniques reveal a crucial conceptual shift: for Russia, nuclear rhetoric is not just a deterrent against existential threats, but a multidimensional instrument of influence. It aims to shape adversary perceptions, manipulate public opinion, and alter the behavior of institutions. The threat of nuclear escalation is thus woven into the fabric of Russia's broader information warfare strategy.

In the Ukrainian case, this strategy has had tangible, though not decisive, effects. It delayed certain Western weapons deliveries, sparked transatlantic debates over escalation, and sowed fear among populations. However, it also exposed the limits of nuclear intimidation: NATO's resolve largely held, and military support to Ukraine continued to increase despite the threats.

Nonetheless, the long-term consequences may be more profound. By normalizing nuclear rhetoric in a regional conflict, Russia risks eroding the taboo against nuclear threats and lowering the global threshold for their use in future crises. The utility of nuclear signaling as a tool of influence has been demonstrated, potentially inspiring similar tactics by other revisionist powers.

Strategic and Policy Implications

Russia's integration of nuclear rhetoric into its Ukraine campaign has exposed fundamental vulnerabilities in the current international nuclear order and NATO's deterrence architecture. While no nuclear weapons have been used, the political and psychological power of Russia's signaling has had destabilizing consequences. It has revealed how nuclear threats can shape the strategic environment, influence alliance cohesion, and corrode long-standing norms. These developments have generated multiple lessons learned with strategic and policy implications:

1. Risks of strategic miscalculation and misinterpretation

Perhaps the most urgent concern is the risk of strategic miscalculation. In moments of high tension, Russia's ambiguity could be interpreted as a signal of imminent escalation or, conversely, as a bluff, prompting a misaligned response. This ambiguity is especially dangerous in an environment with short decision-making windows and limited channels for crisis communication. As Russia's behavior increasingly decouples deterrence from operational restraint, there is a growing possibility that either side may misread intentions, especially in the

⁵⁷ "Behind the Curtain: Unveiling Pro-Kremlin Ecosystems in Europe," Institute for Strategic Dialogue (ISD) Global, January 9, 2025, www.isdglobal.org/publication/behind-the-curtain-unveiling-pro-kremlin-ecosystems-in-europe-2/.

event of battlefield escalation, inadvertent strikes, or hybrid operations involving NATO territory. In such a context, even conventional incidents could rapidly spiral into nuclear confrontation.

2. *Erosion of nuclear norms and deterrence stability*

Since the launch of the war in Ukraine in 2022, we have observed a notable erosion of nuclear norms, particularly the post-Cold War taboo⁵⁸ against using nuclear rhetoric as a routine political tool. Russia's repeated invocation of its nuclear capabilities has normalized what was once considered highly escalatory behavior. This erosion undermines deterrence stability by reducing the perceived consequences of nuclear threats. The more such rhetoric is tolerated or left unanswered, the more likely it is to be replicated by other nuclear powers or aspirants. North Korea's integration of nuclear signaling into its routine diplomacy and China's growing investment in theater nuclear capabilities suggest a troubling trend: the emergence of a multipolar nuclear environment in which coercive rhetoric becomes a standard tool of statecraft. Moreover, Russia's withdrawal from arms control agreements, such as New START and the Comprehensive Nuclear-Test-Ban Treaty (CTBT), indicates a long-term degradation of strategic transparency and verification norms. This move not only reduces predictability but also erodes mutual trust, which is an essential pillar of crisis management and escalation control.

3. *Challenges for NATO's deterrence posture and credibility*

NATO's collective deterrence strategy is also being tested. While the alliance has successfully maintained unity and avoided direct military confrontation with Russia, Russian nuclear rhetoric has had a dampening effect on the speed and nature of Western responses. Early hesitations regarding certain weapons systems were partly shaped by fear of triggering Russian escalation. This illustrates a central challenge: how to deter nuclear blackmail without inviting confrontation. Russia's behavior reveals a conceptual gap in NATO's posture between conventional force readiness and nuclear signaling. The current declaratory policies, especially the emphasis on nuclear weapons as a last resort, may not sufficiently deter nuclear intimidation in regional conflicts involving strategic ambiguity. Furthermore, the credibility of NATO's deterrence is tied to public and political confidence. Russia's successful efforts to sow fear, doubt, and division in Western societies threaten to undermine this confidence.⁵⁹ If allies begin to question

⁵⁸ Nina Tannenwald, James M. Acton, and Jane Vaynman, *Meeting the Challenges of the New Nuclear Age: Emerging Risks and Declining Norms in the Age of Technological Innovation and Changing Nuclear Doctrines*, sec. 3, "The Great Unraveling: The Future of the Nuclear Normative Order" (Cambridge, MA: American Academy of Arts & Sciences, 2018), www.amacad.org/sites/default/files/publication/downloads/New-Nuclear-Age_Emerging-Risks.pdf.

⁵⁹ Liviu Horovitz and Anna Clara Arndt, "Russia's Catch-All Nuclear Rhetoric in Its War against Ukraine: A Balancing Act between Deterrence, Dissuasion, and Compellence Strategies," Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik (SWP) Comment 2022/C 60, October 19, 2022, <https://doi.org/10.18449/2022C60>; Claire Mills, "Russia's Use of Nuclear

NATO's ability or willingness to respond proportionally, deterrence could be weakened from within.

4. The need for psychological and informational resilience

Russia's nuclear signaling has not been confined to statecraft or military messaging. It has functioned as a tool of psychological and informational warfare aimed at undermining the political will of democratic societies. By amplifying fears of nuclear escalation, feeding disinformation about Ukraine's intentions, and exploiting divisions within NATO states, Russia seeks to paralyze decision-making and shift the strategic initiative. This dynamic highlights the importance of societal resilience. While military deterrence is essential, it must be matched by public preparedness, political consensus, and media literacy. Psychological manipulation, when unchallenged, can have real strategic effects.

Overall, the strategic implications of Russia's nuclear rhetoric are profound. They affect not only the current war in Ukraine but also the integrity of global deterrence frameworks. The war has exposed vulnerabilities that must be addressed through comprehensive policy adaptation.

Policy Recommendations

The Ukraine war has made it clear that nuclear rhetoric can no longer be treated as a separate or isolated domain of statecraft. Instead, it must be addressed as an integrated element of Russia's broader influence operations. NATO and its partners must adapt accordingly by combining strategic communication, alliance posture, and political resilience to counter both the military and psychological effects of coercive nuclear signaling. The following recommendations outline a strategic framework to meet this challenge:

1. Integrate nuclear signaling into NATO's counter-influence strategy

NATO and Western governments should explicitly recognize nuclear rhetoric as a deliberate tool of influence, not merely a deterrent mechanism. Countering it requires moving beyond a reactive posture and incorporating nuclear messaging into whole-of-government influence response frameworks, including public diplomacy, strategic communications, and hybrid threat monitoring units.

This means including nuclear themes in disinformation mapping, influence campaign assessments, and election interference risk profiles. It also means treating nuclear rhetoric as a cognitive weapon, where deterrence is achieved not only through credibility but also by exposing and delegitimizing the intent behind the signaling. Strategic communications units across NATO must be trained to identify nuclear references in state media narratives, analyze the political contexts in which they arise, and rapidly counter or neutralize them before they shape public perception.

Threats during the Ukraine Conflict," Research Briefing CBP-9825, House of Commons Library, December 20, 2024, <https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk/research-briefings/cbp-9825/>.

2. Reinforce NATO's deterrence posture through clear and credible messaging

To offset the psychological effects of Russia's ambiguity, NATO must reinforce the credibility and clarity of its own deterrence posture. This includes:

- Clarifying NATO's nuclear red lines and escalation thresholds in official communications, especially when Russia attempts to redefine its own
- Responding to Russia's doctrinal shifts and deployments (e.g., in Belarus) not only with military readiness but also with coordinated public messaging that underscores Alliance unity and proportionate resolve
- Avoiding mirroring Russia's escalatory tone while publicly invalidating the legitimacy of nuclear threats as tools of coercion. NATO's deterrence narrative must emphasize restraint without implying weakness
- Elevating strategic deterrence literacy among political elites and the broader public. A better understanding of nuclear signaling dynamics reduces vulnerability to psychological manipulation and political exploitation.

3. Institutionalize forward resilience against nuclear-backed psychological warfare

Western societies must develop forward-looking, institutionalized mechanisms to withstand nuclear-backed disinformation and fearmongering. Russia's success in delaying weapons deliveries and softening public support has often hinged on narratives of imminent nuclear war, reinforced by manipulated images, simulations, and expert commentary.

To counter this, NATO and EU members should:

- Embed nuclear threat literacy modules into resilience initiatives (e.g., under NATO's "Resilience Commitments" or the EU's StratCom task forces)
- Equip independent media and civil society groups with tools to decode and contextualize nuclear threats and distinguish posturing from credible escalation
- Partner with major digital platforms to flag or label state-directed nuclear-scare content as part of hybrid threat management

Such policies must preserve freedom of expression, while ensuring that state-sponsored intimidation does not gain unfiltered traction.

4. Bridge the gap between deterrence and crisis communication

Finally, NATO should invest in crisis communication protocols that explicitly address the risks of misperception arising from nuclear rhetoric during hybrid operations or political escalations. The Ukraine war has shown how easily false narratives—such as Ukraine's supposed "dirty bomb"—can spiral into strategic confusion.

The Alliance should establish:

- A dedicated StratCom-Nuclear liaison group, linking strategic communications experts with nuclear planners and intelligence analysts
- A rapid-reaction narrative cell, capable of issuing timely, fact-based statements in response to nuclear-messaging surges.

These measures will help NATO maintain narrative control, avoid unintended escalation, and deny adversaries the initiative in the cognitive domain.

In sum, addressing Russian nuclear rhetoric demands a strategic, integrated approach. NATO must no longer treat nuclear threats as purely military signals; it must respond to them as influence operations designed to manipulate perceptions, fracture cohesion, and constrain strategy. A recalibrated, proactive Western posture will be essential not only for supporting Ukraine but also for preserving long-term global nuclear stability.

Conclusion

Russia's nuclear rhetoric in the Ukraine war has revealed a fundamental transformation in the nature and function of strategic deterrence. No longer confined to the realm of theoretical escalation or last-resort use, nuclear signaling under the doctrine of *ustrashenie* has become a regularized tool of statecraft used not only to deter, but also to shape perceptions of the adversary, manipulate political discourse, and disrupt alliance decision-making. The psychological and political utility of nuclear threats, even in the absence of actual deployment, underscores Russia's evolving view of deterrence as a fluid and multidimensional process.

This article has shown that Russia's strategic use of nuclear rhetoric is rooted in an approach that diverges sharply from Western deterrence models. While NATO emphasizes deterrence through clarity, credibility, and restraint, Russia has embraced ambiguity, escalation dominance, and psychological coercion. The Ukraine case illustrates how Russia has weaponized uncertainty to achieve political objectives without crossing the nuclear threshold, delaying Western support, stoking fears of escalation, and fracturing unity within democratic societies.

At the same time, the limitations of Russia's approach are also evident. Despite repeated nuclear threats, the West has gradually increased its military aid to Ukraine and begun adapting its strategic posture. Nevertheless, the long-term damage to nuclear norms, arms control frameworks, and global deterrence stability cannot be ignored. If unchallenged, Russia's example may embolden other nuclear states to adopt similar coercive strategies.

To meet this challenge, NATO and its partners must integrate nuclear rhetoric into their broader understanding of influence operations. Deterrence must be both military and cognitive, rooted in credible capabilities but also in the resilience of political systems and public discourse. As strategic competition intensifies, the ability to withstand and counter nuclear intimidation will be as critical as the ability to deter its use.

Disclaimer

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