



Russia Doubles Down on Nuclear Intimidation of NATO

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Fears of escalation should not prevent NATO countries from lifting restrictions on Ukraine's use of Western weapons for self-defence against military targets on Russian territory. Russia's suggestions that it could use nuclear weapons against NATO countries in retaliation for such consent are not credible and such a strike risks NATO's direct involvement in the conflict, which Russia wants to avoid. It will probably continue to intensify its nuclear threats and provocations, to which NATO members should respond by reinforcing the message that any attack on the allies will have severe consequences for Russia.

On 1 September, Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Sergei Ryabkov referred to the ongoing work on revising Russia's nuclear doctrine, portraying it as a response to the "escalation" of the West's actions in relation to the Russian invasion of Ukraine. Earlier, in late July and early August, Russia conducted the third phase of exercises involving its non-strategic nuclear forces (of less than intercontinental range). The manoeuvres were ordered by Vladimir Putin on 6 May. The first stage took place at the end of May in the Southern Military District, bordering Ukraine. The second involved the forces of the Leningrad Military District and Belarus in mid-June. The third stage took place in both the Southern Military District again and also in the Central Military District, located further east. Russian and Belarussian launchers and aircraft, as well as ships of the Russian Baltic Fleet, were armed with dummy nuclear warheads and practiced moving to launch areas.

Russia's latest exercises and statements are yet another in a series of attempts to deter Western countries from increasing military aid to Ukraine. Russia has [repeatedly](#) suggested that it could lead to the use of nuclear weapons. For the first year after the full-scale invasion, it relied mainly on [verbal threats](#), but it began taking [more concrete steps](#) in 2023, most notably announcing in March that it would deploy [nuclear weapons to Belarus](#). Despite that, the countries supporting Ukraine have gradually delivered

additional types of equipment and munitions, as well as intelligence and training assistance.

Russian Signals and Announcements. The latest phase of intensified nuclear intimidation by Russia began in February, following statements by French President Emmanuel Macron about the possibility of sending troops to Ukraine. It intensified further along with the debates on allowing Ukraine to use Western weapons to attack targets in Russia. It was the statements of Western politicians on these two topics that Russia presented as the reason for conducting exercises of its non-strategic nuclear forces and Putin repeatedly threatened the West with escalation. Although he claimed that he saw no need to use nuclear weapons, he also emphasised Russia's readiness to do so if its "sovereignty and territorial integrity" were threatened. He has also pointed to Russia's advantage over NATO in non-strategic nuclear weapons and has questioned whether the U.S. would be ready to risk nuclear war in defence of its allies (e.g., in remarks in Saint Petersburg on 7 June). The exercises of the non-strategic forces demonstrated the ability to launch a nuclear strike on European NATO countries, especially along the Alliance's Eastern Flank. Russia also signalled the possibility of escalation directly against the U.S., including by sending two nuclear-capable ships to Cuba in June.

Russia has indicated the possibility of other steps. In June, it announced work on changes to its nuclear doctrine, which

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presumably will lower the declared Russian threshold for using nuclear weapons. Also in June, Putin once again noted that Russia might resume conducting nuclear tests (the Russian Duma withdrew the ratification of the Comprehensive Nuclear-Test-Ban Treaty in November 2023). Russia has also threatened to further expand its nuclear forces, including by deploying intermediate-range missiles to Europe (in addition to those it had already secretly deployed) if the U.S. implements a plan to place similar [conventionally-armed missiles](#) in Germany.

NATO Countries' Reaction. Alliance countries have loosened restrictions on Ukraine's use of supplied weapons, but it still cannot use Western missiles to attack targets deep inside Russia. The right to strike in self-defence against targets in Russia has been publicly supported in recent months by the Baltic states, Canada, Czechia, Denmark, France, Finland, the Netherlands, Germany, Norway, Sweden, Poland, the United States, and the United Kingdom. However, the U.S. and Germany indicated in late May that their consent only applies to strikes against troops in border areas to repel or prevent attacks launched from there. Due to concerns about escalation of the conflict, the U.S. remains opposed to the use against targets in Russia of the longer-range ATACMS missiles supplied to Ukraine since March. For the same reason, Germany has still not supplied Ukraine with Taurus missiles. Germany and the U.S. are also among the countries critical of the French proposal to send military instructors to Ukraine, and the fate of this initiative is unknown. France and the UK have been delivering long-range SCALP-EG/Storm Shadow missiles to Ukraine for a year now and have not publicly opposed their use against military targets in Russia. However, President Volodymyr Zelensky's statements in August suggest that this is still not possible (according to media reports, this is due to U.S. objections).

NATO members did not announce additional military actions in response to Russia's latest nuclear threats. The U.S. indicated that there were no signals that Russia was preparing for a potential nuclear strike (which in practice could include arming non-strategic forces with real warheads). U.S. officials also presented the subsequent rounds of visits to Europe by elements of U.S. strategic forces, as previously planned. They include bombers (which landed for the first time in Romania, although in a version currently incapable of carrying nuclear weapons), as well as a submarine with intercontinental ballistic missiles (this time it surfaced exceptionally close to Russia, off the western coast of Norway in June and July). The declaration from the NATO July summit in Washington confirmed the

continuation of the Alliance [adaptation of nuclear deterrence](#), which includes the modernisation of U.S. B-61 bombs in Europe and the replacement of aircraft to carry them (to the F-35A), as well as the improvement of conventional support, operational planning, exercises, and strategic communication.

Conclusions and Perspectives. Russian nuclear threats should not deter NATO countries from allowing Ukraine to use Western weapons against military targets that are being used to attack Ukraine from deep inside Russia. Using nuclear weapons in retaliation against NATO countries would be very risky for Russia and contrary to its efforts to deter the Alliance from directly engaging in the conflict. Moreover, Russia has not used nuclear weapons in response to a series of attacks on its territory carried out by Ukraine that used domestically produced weapons (mainly [drones](#)).

At the same time, NATO members should continue to strengthen nuclear deterrence, including through more frequent communication from their highest officials that they will not be intimidated and that escalation will not pay off for Russia. Strengthening this message will be especially important if Russia, as is likely, further enhances its nuclear threats and signaling, probing the Alliance's response. In an attempt to make its threats of escalation more credible, it may also increase [hostile actions](#) below the threshold of open aggression, including aggressive behaviour of its forces against aircraft and ships of Allied countries near its borders and Ukraine.

Russian nuclear intimidation is not currently aimed directly at [Ukraine](#), despite the fact that it has taken control over some of Russia's [border areas](#) (with Western weapons used in those operations). The Russian leadership is counting on retaking these areas with conventional forces while also conducting an offensive in Donbas. There is, however, a risk that Putin would consider using nuclear weapons against Ukraine if Russian troops were to face a fundamental defeat that he perceives as threatening the stability of his regime (presumably, this could be, for example, the loss of control over Crimea with no prospect of its rapid recovery). However, such a scenario is not only remote in the current military situation, but if it does occur, [Russian calculations](#) would probably depend on an assessment of the possible reaction of NATO countries, especially the United States. If Russia were to win or at least avoid defeat in the war against Ukraine thanks to its nuclear threats, that would increase the risk of further aggression under cover of such intimidation, including against NATO.