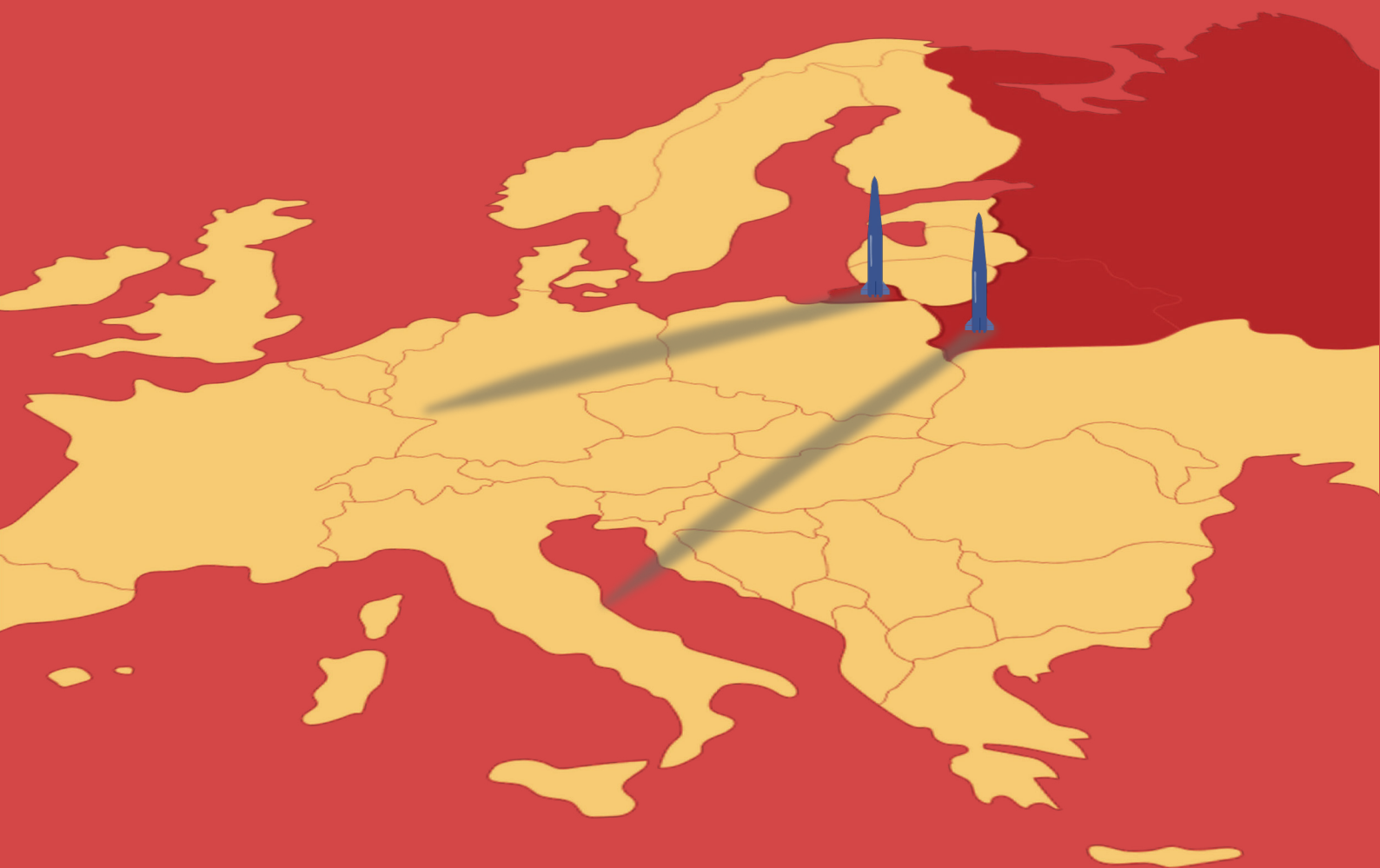


Not Only Iskanders

Nuclear Threats to NATO's Eastern Flank

Anna Maria Dyner, Artur Kacprzyk, Łukasz Kulesa



PISM

POLSKI INSTYTUT SPRAW MIĘDZYNARODOWYCH
THE POLISH INSTITUTE OF INTERNATIONAL AFFAIRS

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Anna Maria Dyner, Artur Kacprzyk, Łukasz Kulesa

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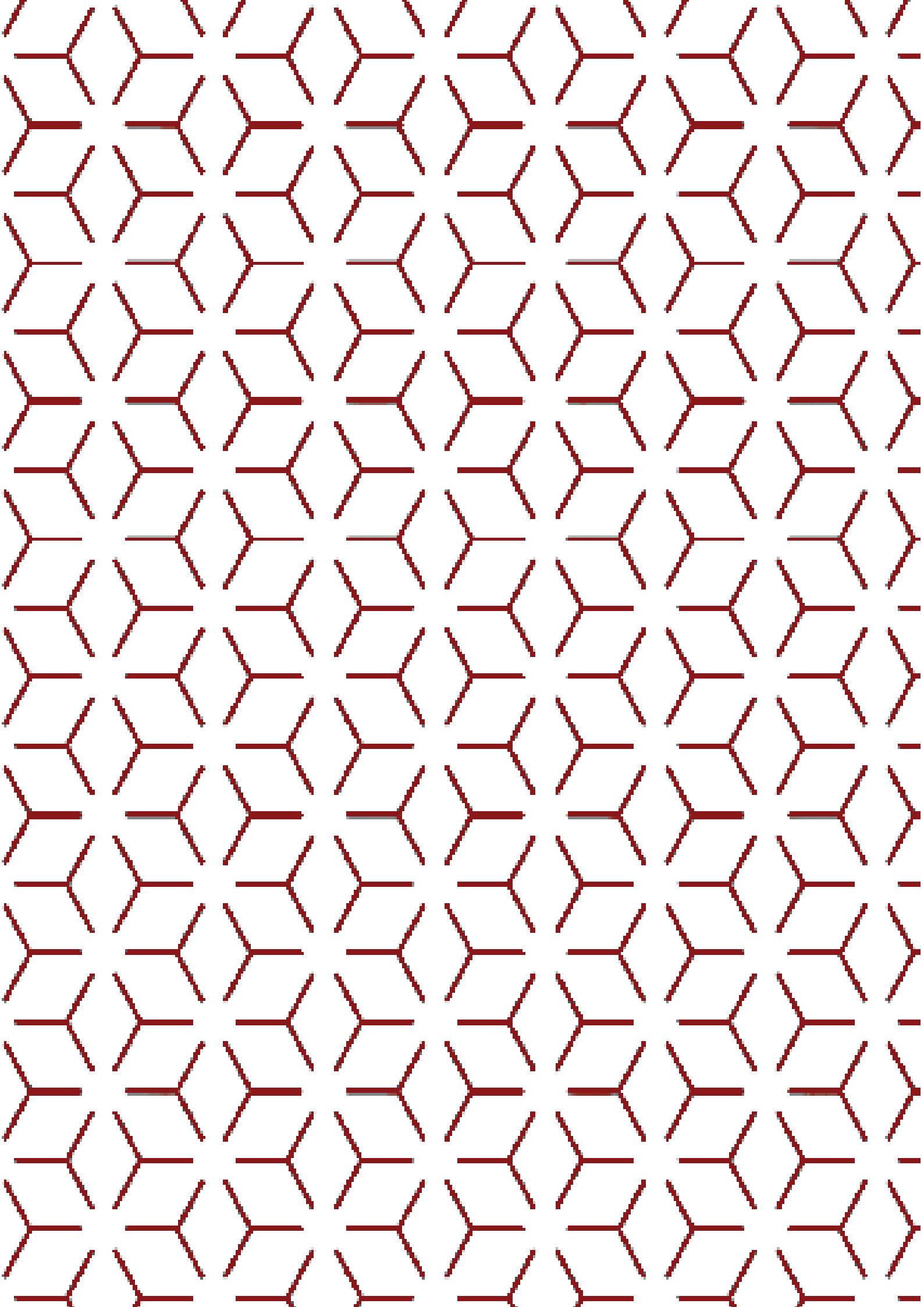
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Introduction

The large-scale nuclear exercises conducted by the Russian Federation (RF) between 19 and 21 May 2026 stood out for several reasons.¹ Usually, Russia does not organise manoeuvres at this time of year which cover the full spectrum of capabilities needed for nuclear escalation against targets in Europe and beyond, namely strategic (intercontinental) and non-strategic (medium- and short-range) nuclear delivery systems. Furthermore, Russia stated that nuclear warheads were deployed to its non-strategic forces during the exercises.² These were also the first exercises within the framework of the Union State to be jointly led by the leaders of Russia and Belarus,³ resulting from Russia equipping and preparing Belarusian forces in recent years for the potential use of Russian nuclear weapons.

The exercises, broadly publicised by the Russian authorities and media, were the latest in a series of intensified actions in recent years to demonstrate Russia's readiness to use nuclear weapons. In this way, the Russian authorities seek to stoke fears of nuclear war amongst the governments and populations of NATO countries. The aim is not only to deter them from potential aggressive actions, but also to intimidate them, pushing these countries to limit both their support for Ukraine—which is under attack by Russia—and their response to other Russian actions, including hybrid operations. The countries on the Alliance's central-eastern flank were among the key targets of this message. The conduct of these and other Russian exercises involving non-strategic forces clearly indicates that these countries would be among the most important potential targets for the short- and medium-range nuclear-capable weapon systems deployed in Belarus and the Leningrad Military District (which includes Kaliningrad Oblast). This is also supported by statements from Russian officials, who in recent months have increasingly drawn attention to rising tensions between Russia and European NATO

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¹ For further details, see: P. Podvig, "[Exercise of strategic forces held in May](https://russianforces.org)," Russian strategic nuclear forces blog, 21 May 2026, <https://russianforces.org>; W. Alberque, "[The Return of Nuclear Warfighting](https://walberque.substack.com)," William Alberque Substack, 22 May 2026, <https://walberque.substack.com>.

² "[Минобороны РФ сообщило о пусках ракет "Ярс", "Кинжал", "Циркон", "Синева" на учениях ядерных сил](http://kremlin.ru)," Interfax, 21 May 2026, [www.interfax.ru](http://kremlin.ru). See also the comments by the Russian Chief of General Staff V. Gerasimov in: "[Учения ядерных сил](http://kremlin.ru)," Президент России, 21 May 2026, <http://kremlin.ru>.

³ In 2022, Alexander Lukashenka participated merely as an observer. For more see: "[Учение сил стратегического сдерживания](http://kremlin.ru)," Президент России, 19 February 2022, <http://kremlin.ru>.

members, including highlighting their efforts to strengthen nuclear deterrence, for example declarations by Poland and others regarding cooperation with France on this theme.⁴ This year's manoeuvres were also a show of force aimed at the Russian public and, according to some commentators, at Ukraine as well, which a few days earlier had carried out major drone counter-strikes against targets in Moscow.⁵

The exercises carried out in May also confirmed that Belarus has become an increasingly important tool in Russian nuclear signalling towards NATO. The Kaliningrad Oblast exclave, as Russia's westernmost territory, has long played a similar role, and the significance of these two areas may increase even further. The capabilities deployed there, the drills conducted in those areas and other signals sent by Russia should be assessed within the broader context of its nuclear policy, the development of its capabilities and the evolution of its doctrine on the use of nuclear weapons, influenced by its experiences from the war with Ukraine and the wider confrontation with NATO. This PISM report will explore and analyse all these topics, leading to a set of conclusions and recommendations for enhancing the Alliance's deterrence posture.

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⁴ "Senior diplomat sees growing risks of head-on clash between NATO, Russia," TASS, 19 May 2026, <https://tass.com>.

⁵ А. Бровко, "Зачем Россия проводит ядерные учения у себя и в Беларуси? "Это может быть психологическая операция для Украины и стран НАТО", *Настоящее Время*, 21 May 2026, www.currenttime.tv; И. Дрибен, "Ядерные учения РФ на фоне украинских атак дронов," *Deutsche Welle*, 20 May 2026, www.dw.com.

Key conclusions

For Russia, nuclear weapons are not only a deterrent to potential aggression, but also a tool of intimidation. Russia applies its nuclear threats to try to coerce its adversaries into making concessions and acting according to Russia's demands. An example of this is its attempts to dissuade NATO countries from supporting Ukraine. Although the Russian authorities' actions to date suggest that they regard the decision to use nuclear weapons as a last resort, the thresholds declared in the country's nuclear doctrine leave considerable room for interpretation. Attempts at nuclear intimidation have been a constant feature of Russia's strategic communication towards NATO and have seen particularly extensive use since the start of the full-scale invasion of Ukraine. The purpose of such signalling may be to escalate tensions in relations with Alliance member states, to test their reactions (as Russia is counting on exposing divisions within the Alliance), or to demonstrate displeasure regarding their support for Ukraine or the deployment of additional forces or new weapons systems on NATO territory. In an extreme scenario, Russia may employ nuclear intimidation to back up overt or covert aggression against NATO members, especially as the ongoing and prospective reductions in US engagement in Europe might prompt Russia to test the Alliance's effectiveness and cohesion even more strongly. A direct military clash would carry the risk of the use of nuclear weapons, especially if Russia were to find itself losing on the battlefield.

If Russia opted for nuclear escalation, Poland and other countries on NATO's central-eastern flank would be particularly exposed to a Russian nuclear attack. Nuclear strikes from the territory of Belarus and/or Kaliningrad Oblast could constitute an attempt to force NATO members to back down and end the conflict on Russia's terms. In such a scenario, limited strikes may be ordered, with the primary purpose of demonstrating Russia's willingness to escalate further. They may also be aimed at achieving operational objectives.

The declaration issued at the NATO summit in Ankara in July 2026 confirmed that Russia remains a long-term threat to the Alliance and to Euro-Atlantic security.⁶ Russia's intensified attempts to intimidate NATO members—including through the build-up and

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⁶ A. Kacprzyk, "The Ankara Summit—a step towards the Europeanisation of NATO," *PISM Bulletin*, No. 43 (2675), 9 July 2026, www.pism.pl.

display of its nuclear capabilities near the borders of Poland and other countries on the eastern flank—require the North Atlantic Alliance to further adapt and strengthen its nuclear deterrence. The defence ministers of the Alliance announced the continuation of this process in June this year, following a meeting of the NATO Nuclear Planning Group (NPG).⁷ The main aim of enhanced deterrent measures should be to convince Russia that it would be unable to control escalation of a conflict with NATO, and that any use of nuclear weapons on its part would risk a severe response.

- Expanding the nuclear sharing arrangements to include additional countries from NATO's eastern flank, including Poland, would strengthen NATO's nuclear capabilities and underline its readiness to use them to respond to a nuclear attack on member states in this region. NATO should also begin work as soon as possible on a new generation of delivery systems for non-strategic nuclear weapons, such as missiles launched from aircraft and mobile land-based launchers.
- Effort should also be made to undermine Russia's confidence in its operational capabilities to use non-strategic nuclear weapons against European NATO member states. One way of doing this would be for the Alliance to strengthen appropriate conventional capabilities and signal its willingness to use them to neutralise Russia's nuclear forces deployed in Kaliningrad Oblast and Belarus.
- Expanding Allied conventional deep-strike systems capable of striking more than 1,000 km into Russia would form an important element of deterrence, and also support NATO's nuclear forces.
- NATO's deterrence efforts could be complemented by the full implementation of the French "forward deterrence" initiative, including organising nuclear force exercises on the eastern flank.
- Finally, any Russian proposals to limit nuclear capabilities in Kaliningrad Oblast and Belarus through arms control should be approached with great caution. It would be particularly disadvantageous to trade non-deployment of nuclear warheads in these regions for concessions that reduce the presence of US nuclear forces in Europe, and/or restrict their deployment in other Alliance countries, participation in NATO's nuclear sharing programme, or cooperation with France on forward deterrence. Even if Russia honoured such a deal, it would still retain extensive capabilities to target the eastern flank, alongside the ability to rapidly deploy nuclear weapons to border territories during a crisis.

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⁷ 2026 Nuclear Planning Group Statement, NATO, 18 June 2026, www.nato.int.

Methodology

This report aims to identify the threat that Russia's policy of nuclear intimidation poses to the Alliance, particularly to the countries on its central-eastern flank, and to set out recommendations on strengthening deterrence towards Russia. The authors have therefore chosen to begin by outlining changes in Russian strategic documents and tracing the evolution of Russia's likely concepts of nuclear weapons use, taking into account the course of the full-scale war with Ukraine that began on 24 February 2022. In particular, the report discusses the growing significance of Belarus and the role of Kaliningrad Oblast in intimidating the states of NATO's eastern flank, as well as the consequences of the changes being introduced by Russia for the Alliance as a whole. This structure not only enables the empirical material to be organised but also allows for the development of coherent recommendations for NATO and its member states.

By "central-eastern flank" of NATO, the authors describe the area covering Poland, Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia, the countries most exposed to nuclear threat from Belarus and the Kaliningrad Oblast. The report also uses the term "eastern flank" of NATO to describe a broader part of NATO territory which stretches from Finland to Bulgaria.

The authors define Russia's policy of nuclear intimidation as any measures taken by Russia that involve or refer to its nuclear arsenal and aim to force concessions and alter the status quo. A central objective of these actions is discouraging NATO member states from supporting Ukraine and from responding to Russian hostility, including through strengthening deterrence and defence capabilities. Russian nuclear intimidation actions include hostile statements by representatives of the ruling elite directed at NATO member states, referring directly or indirectly to nuclear weapons; amendments to strategic and doctrinal documents indicating a lower threshold for nuclear use; conducting nuclear and nuclear-related exercises; deploying nuclear forces close to Alliance territory, including in Belarus; and escalatory narratives across Russian expert and media circles. Hostile actions on the international stage have included the decision to "suspend" the US-Russian New Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (New START) and the withdrawal of ratification of the Comprehensive Nuclear-Test-Ban Treaty (CTBT).

Concerning the terms “non-strategic” and “tactical” nuclear weapons used in this report, in accordance with the arms control agreements between the US and Russia (and previously the Soviet Union), the category of non-strategic nuclear weapons includes nuclear delivery systems with a range of less than 5,500 km. However, the NATO countries and Russia use various definitions of subcategories of non-strategic nuclear weapons. The term tactical nuclear weapons is generally used to describe systems intended for short-range use, primarily on the battlefield and its vicinity, with ranges of up to 300 or 500 km. Systems capable of striking at longer ranges are referred to as medium- and intermediate-range, theatre, or operational systems.

In this text, the authors have drawn on official doctrinal documents of the Russian Federation, including Fundamentals of State Policy of the Russian Federation on Nuclear Deterrence,⁸ commonly referred to as the nuclear doctrine (with particular emphasis on the amendments introduced to this document in 2024), and bilateral security agreements concluded between Russia and the Republic of Belarus. The authors also examined statements by leading Russian and Belarusian politicians, officials, and military figures, as well as Russian discourse on nuclear intimidation and deterrence, which, taken together with the operational practices of nuclear forces and their capabilities, allows drawing conclusions regarding the likely concepts for their use. The authors also took into account the conduct of nuclear exercises carried out by Russia in recent years. The description of the Russian nuclear capabilities (delivery systems and potentially also warheads) deployed in Belarus and Kaliningrad Oblast is based on a comprehensive analysis of Russian and Belarusian sources, media reporting, and research carried out by Western think tanks, including satellite imagery analysis. The authors clearly delineate where they cannot conclusively determine the facts on the basis of open-source information, such as whether nuclear warheads are stationed in Kaliningrad Oblast.

The authors used publicly available materials, including reports from several think tanks and research centres, as well as threat assessments provided by NATO member states. The authors’ conclusions also stem from their participation in conferences, simulation exercises and closed-door expert seminars.

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⁸ „Указ Президента Российской Федерации от 19.11.2024 г. № 991 об утверждении Основ государственной политики Российской Федерации в области ядерного сдерживания,” Президент России, 19 November 2024, www.kremlin.ru; English version: “[Fundamentals of State Policy of the Russian Federation on Nuclear Deterrence](#),” The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, 3 December 2024, www.mid.ru.

Russia's official nuclear doctrine

Russia's current official nuclear doctrine was set out in the presidential decree on the Fundamentals of State Policy on Nuclear Deterrence from November 2024. As its main objectives, it lists deterring aggression against Russia and its allies, and, in the event of war, the prevention of escalation of hostilities and their cessation on terms acceptable to Russia.⁹ According to this document, the decision to use nuclear weapons rests with the President of Russia, and the conditions that might enable such a decision include:

- aggression using conventional means against Russia and/or Belarus, which would pose a critical threat to their sovereignty and/or territorial integrity;
- the detection of ballistic missiles being launched against the territory of Russia or its allies;
- the use of nuclear weapons or other weapons of mass destruction against Russia or its allies, as well as against its military installations and forces deployed outside Russian territory;
- actions by adversaries affecting "critically important state or military infrastructure" of the Russian Federation, the disablement of which would disrupt its nuclear response;
- the detection of the massive take-off of air and space attack means (including combat aircraft, cruise and hypersonic missiles, and drones) and their crossing of the Russian Federation's border.

Russia claims that any aggression by a member of an alliance opposed to it will be treated as an attack by the entire bloc. Furthermore, it stipulates that aggression committed by a non-nuclear state, if supported by a nuclear-armed power, will be regarded as a joint attack.

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⁹ *Ibidem*. See also: A. Kacprzyk, "Russia Changes Its Nuclear Doctrine," *PISM Bulletin*, No. 174 (2462), 21 November 2024, www.pism.pl. For the previous version of the doctrine from 2020, see: "2020 Basic Principles of State Policy of the Russian Federation on Nuclear Deterrence," *Russia Matters*, www.russiamatters.org.

The Russian nuclear doctrine also outlines several military risks intended to be neutralised through nuclear deterrence. In practice, these represent actions which Russia seeks to dissuade adversaries from pursuing, by indicating that such actions heighten the perceived level of threat to Russia and significantly increase the risk of war and nuclear response. Such actions include:

- possession by potential adversaries of nuclear weapons, other weapons of mass destruction, and their delivery systems, which can be used against Russia or its allies;
- possession by potential adversaries of missile defence systems, intermediate- and shorter-range ballistic and cruise missiles, hypersonic missiles, combat drones and directed-energy weapons (e.g. lasers);
- the build-up, near the borders of Russia and its allies, of military forces equipped with the means of delivering nuclear weapons, or of infrastructure for their employment;
- the development and deployment by adversaries of missile defence, anti-satellite and strike systems in space;
- the deployment of nuclear weapons and their delivery systems on the territories of non-nuclear states;
- the formation or expansion of military coalitions leading to their infrastructure advancing closer to Russia's borders;
- actions aimed at isolating parts of Russian territory, including blocking access to vital transport routes;
- attempts to destroy Russian facilities that could lead to "technogenic, ecological or social disasters";
- planning and conducting large-scale military exercises in the vicinity of Russia;
- the uncontrolled proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, their delivery systems, and the technology and equipment required for their manufacture.

This therefore offers Russia a broad catalogue of grievances spanning a wide range of activities by NATO member states. Depending on its current political objectives, Russia can make use of developments from this list as pretexts for nuclear posturing, for example to heighten the sense of threat amongst Alliance members.

Russian concepts for the use of nuclear weapons

The public version of the Russian nuclear doctrine does not specify what the use of nuclear weapons by Russia might look like in terms of the scale and targets of strikes. It merely notes that nuclear forces are to be capable of inflicting “assured unacceptable damage” on an adversary. Further details are contained in classified doctrinal and planning documents. Insights into possible and contemplated options in this regard can be gleaned from statements and articles by Russian strategists (politicians, military officers, officials and experts), as well as from the size and composition of the nuclear forces and the conduct of Russian nuclear exercises.

The primary purpose of Russia’s nuclear forces is coercive: to influence adversary behaviour through the possibility of their use. The goals include enabling Russia to manage escalation during a conflict (i.e. limit the area, scale or intensity of hostilities), and to terminate the war on terms favourable to Russia. It may also use nuclear weapons to wage war, that is, to destroy the enemy’s military and economic potential.¹⁰ Russia’s extensive and diverse nuclear forces provide it with a wide range of operational options.

Whilst the Russian strategic approach to global conflict focuses on the massive use of nuclear forces, concepts of limited nuclear strikes dominate thinking on the potential use of such weapons in regional conflicts (in Europe and Asia).¹¹

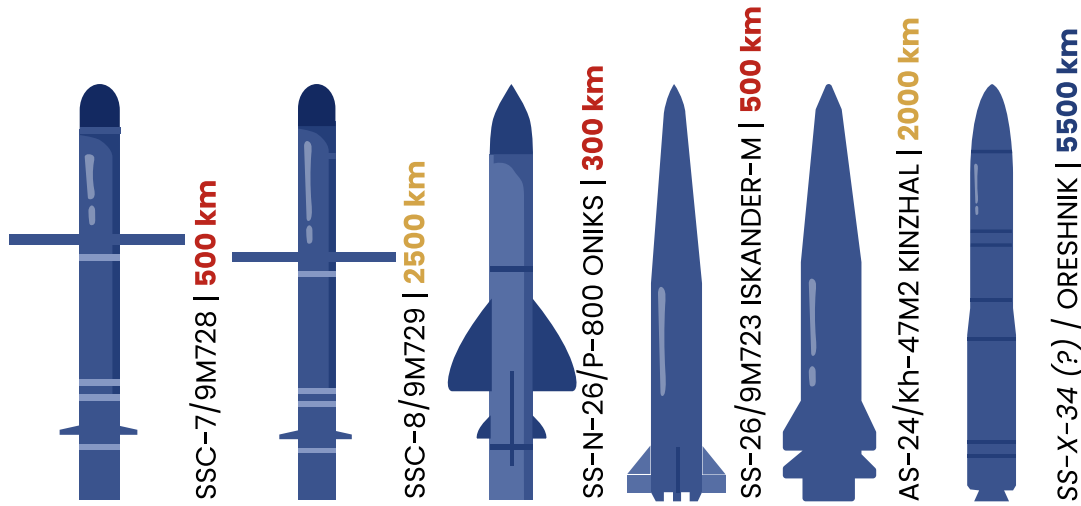
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¹⁰ M. Kofman, A. Loukianova Fink, “[Escalation Management and Nuclear Employment in Russian Military Strategy](https://warontherocks.com),” *War on the Rocks*, 19 September 2022, <https://warontherocks.com>.

¹¹ This does not rule out the possibility of using intercontinental-range systems in a regional or limited conflict. In the “Zapad” exercises in 1999, for example, Russia practised limited nuclear strikes against NATO using cruise missiles launched from strategic bombers. J. Kipp, “Russia’s Nonstrategic Nuclear Weapons,” *Military Review*, May–June 2001, p. 5. Russian military literature notes, however, that an attack using strategic nuclear systems—particularly ballistic missiles—could be perceived as the start of a larger intercontinental strike and provoke the enemy into responding with a major counterstrike. See K. Zysk, “Nonstrategic nuclear weapons in Russia’s evolving military doctrine,” *Bulletin of Atomic Scientists*, Vol. 73, No. 5, 2017, p. 324.

Diagram 1

Select nuclear-capable missiles likely deployed in Belarus and Kaliningrad Oblast and their estimated ranges



Source: graphic prepared by authors based on "Missiles of Russia," *Missile Threat*, 9 January 2026, <https://missilethreat.csis.org/country/russia>.



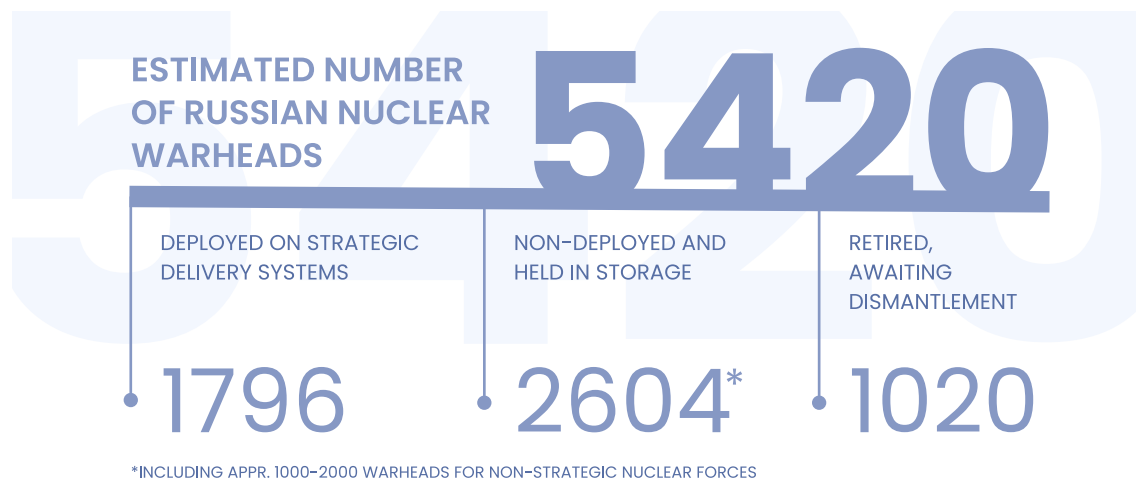
Russia's intercontinental (strategic) nuclear forces are primarily intended to be capable of launching a massive retaliatory strike against the enemy's main political, military and economic centres, and in particular against targets in the US. This does not fundamentally distinguish Russian doctrine from that of other nuclear states—the ability to survive an enemy strike whilst retaining sufficient forces to carry out a devastating counterstrike is the basis of deterrence amongst nuclear powers. Russia, much like the Soviet Union during the Cold War, has long expressed concerns about the possibility of the US carrying out a "disarming" strike against its strategic arsenal or a "decapitation" strike against its leadership.¹² To counter such scenarios, it maintains the option to launch intercontinental ballistic missiles in response to the detection of any ballistic missile attack, as well as a mechanism allowing their launch to be ordered even if the Russian leadership are killed.¹³ These Cold War concerns persist, exacerbated by

¹² The source of these concerns has been the US's technological advantages in terms of precision of missiles and bombs, stealthiness of some aircraft, highly advanced intelligence and reconnaissance capabilities, as well as anti-submarine warfare capabilities (as submarines carry a significant proportion of Russia's intercontinental missiles). See, for example, B.R. Green, A. Long, "The MAD Who Wasn't There: Soviet Reactions to the Late Cold War Nuclear Balance," *Security Studies*, Vol. 26, No. 4, 2017.

¹³ Since the 1980s, the "Perimeter" system has enabled officers hidden in special bunkers to launch a specialised communications rocket that transmits launch orders to ballistic missiles. However, this requires several conditions to be met: the system must first be activated by the Russian leadership; the officers in the bunker must lose contact with the leadership; and seismic sensors must confirm nuclear explosions on Russian territory. The USSR also developed a concept for a fully automated version of this system (without human involvement in the decision to launch a retaliatory strike) known as the "Dead

Diagram 2

The estimated size of the Russian nuclear stockpile



Source: table prepared by authors on the basis of H.M. Kristensen et al., "Russian Nuclear Weapons, 2026," *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, 14 May 2026, <https://thebulletin.org>.

US progress in the development of advanced non-nuclear weapons and strategic missile defence systems.¹⁴ At the same time, Russia views the much smaller nuclear arsenals of the UK and France as complementary to US capabilities.¹⁵

Russian non-strategic nuclear forces would play a key role in regional conflicts involving Russia, including in Europe against Poland and other countries on NATO's eastern flank.¹⁶ Russia's arsenal of such weapons is significantly larger than that of NATO countries, as it has been intended to counterbalance their qualitative and quantitative superiority in conventional forces that emerged following the collapse of the USSR and the Warsaw Pact.¹⁷ For years, Russian strategists have regarded massive conventional strikes by US

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Hand". There are reports that this has been put into operation by Russia, although this has not been confirmed. See D.E. Hoffman, *The Dead Hand*, New York: Doubleday, 2009, pp. 366-368, 421-423.

¹⁴ See, for example, remarks by Russian Defence Minister Andrei Belousov and Deputy Foreign Minister Sergei Ryabkov: "Meeting with permanent members of the Security Council," President of Russia, 5 November 2025, <http://en.kremlin.ru>; "Deputy Foreign Minister Sergey Ryabkov's opening remarks at a briefing at the Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency on arms control and strategic stability," Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, 11 February 2021, www.mid.ru.

¹⁵ "Russia to consider UK-France nuclear partnership in military planning—senior diplomat," TASS, 10 July 2025, <https://tass.com>.

¹⁶ See K. Zysk, *op. cit.*; W. Alberque, "Russian Military Thought and Doctrine Related to Non-strategic Nuclear Weapons: Change and Continuity," International Institute for Strategic Studies, 22 January 2024, <https://www.iiss.org>.

¹⁷ According to official US assessments and the most frequently cited non-governmental estimates, Russia's non-strategic nuclear arsenal comprises approximately 1,000-2,000 warheads for various ground-, sea-, and air-launched systems (including land-attack, anti-ship, and air defence missiles), landmines,

air and missile forces as a particularly dangerous scenario, fearing that the US could inflict enormous losses on Russia's military and economic potential in this way, while keeping its nuclear weapons in reserve to deter Russia from nuclear retaliation. Such concerns have only grown in the wake of military interventions led and coordinated by the US since the end of the Cold War, particularly the bombing of Serbia during the Kosovo War in 1999. Russian military officials and leaders feared that the US might act in a similar manner using conventional forces during a crisis involving Russia.¹⁸

Russian leaders, including Vladimir Putin, frequently present their large arsenal of short- and medium-range nuclear weapons as a crucial advantage over NATO.¹⁹ At the same time, Russia demands the complete withdrawal of US nuclear weapons from Europe, claiming they pose a direct threat to its territory. It also criticises any initiatives that would strengthen the Alliance's nuclear capabilities, including proposals to include Poland in US nuclear sharing mechanisms and deploy nuclear forces closer to Russia, and the French concept of "forward deterrence."²⁰

Since the 1990s, Russian strategists have been developing concepts for the limited use of nuclear weapons,²¹ regarded as the primary means of protecting Russia from defeat in a conventional conflict. These are sometimes referred to—mainly in the West—as "escalation for de-escalation." Carrying out such strikes would be intended to demonstrate Russia's readiness to use nuclear weapons on a larger scale, should the adversary continue fighting.²² The limited use of nuclear weapons would primarily

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torpedoes, depth charges and aerial bombs. See: "Annual Nonstrategic Nuclear Weapons Report (2024)," US Department of State, 25 February 2025, pp. 2–3, www.state.gov; H.M. Kristensen et al., "Russian Nuclear Weapons, 2026," *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, 14 May 2026, <https://thebulletin.org>. However, some non-governmental experts estimate that Russia's non-strategic nuclear arsenal is considerably larger. See M.B. Schneider, "How Many Nuclear Weapons Does Russia Have? The Size and Characteristics of the Russian Nuclear Stockpile," National Institute for Public Policy, 2 November 2023, <https://nipp.org>.

¹⁸ See J. Kipp, *op. cit.*; N. Sokov, "Why Russia calls a limited nuclear strike 'de-escalation,'" *Bulletin of Atomic Scientists*, 13 March 2014, <https://thebulletin.org>.

¹⁹ See, for example, "Plenary session of the St Petersburg International Economic Forum," President of Russia, 16 June 2023, <http://en.kremlin.ru>. NATO's non-strategic arsenal is estimated to comprise around 200 US air-dropped bombs, of which around 100 are deployed in Europe. France also possesses around 50 nuclear warheads for shorter-range air-launched cruise missiles. France classifies these missiles and any other type of nuclear weapon as "strategic" to emphasise the immense implications that any use of them would have. H.M. Kristensen et al., "United States nuclear weapons 2026," *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, 12 March 2026, <https://thebulletin.org>; *Ibidem*, "French nuclear weapons, 2025," *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, 15 July 2025, <https://thebulletin.org>.

²⁰ "Russia insists on the withdrawal of US nuclear weapons from Europe — Russian diplomat," TASS, 9 June 2026, <https://tass.com>; "Russia's military planning to take into account NATO's growing nuclear capabilities," TASS, 19 May 2026, <https://tass.com>; "Russia says Polish discussion on hosting US nuclear weapons is dangerous," Reuters, 25 April 2024, www.reuters.com.

²¹ See a detailed discussion of Russian military literature on this subject in: M. Kofman, A. Loukianova Fink, J. Edmonds, "Russian Strategy for Escalation Management: Evolution of Key Concepts," CNA Report, April 2020, www.cna.org; D. Johnson, "Russia's Conventional Precision Strike Capabilities, Regional Crises, and Nuclear Thresholds," *Livermore Papers on Global Security*, No. 3, February 2018.

²² Although the public version of the Russian nuclear doctrine does not explicitly refer to the concept of limited use of nuclear weapons, such use would be consistent with its stated objective of preventing

serve a political objective: breaking the adversary's will to fight by intimidating them with the threat of further escalation. This concept involves carrying out selective strikes, with the potential to gradually intensify them with an increasing number of warheads against an increasing number of targets, inflicting ever-greater losses on the enemy. This selectivity and scalability are intended to limit the risk that the adversary might regard Russian strikes as painful enough to justify nuclear retaliation, especially on a massive scale. According to Russian strategists, the main objective of limited strikes is therefore to amplify and exploit the enemy's fears of a total nuclear war, without the need to wage one. Non-strategic nuclear weapons play an important role in such concepts, in large part because many of them are much more precise and carry warheads with much smaller explosive power (yield) than the strategic systems.

During a regional conflict, Russia may also use nuclear weapons for purely military objectives (the destruction of the adversary's capabilities), either through limited strikes or as a transition to unrestricted war should attempts to control escalation fail. For years, Russian military theorists have explored various selective strike options, from purely demonstrative (e.g. a detonation over an uninhabited area), through attacks against adversary forces, to use against "critically important" military, political and economic infrastructure. As indicated by a comprehensive study of Russian military literature, such "critical" military targets most frequently identified for limited strikes are command centres, systems used for reconnaissance, targeting, and navigation, key communications nodes, space-based systems, and bases hosting an adversary's missile forces; whilst the political and economic targets considered include power stations (excluding nuclear facilities), airports and seaports, roads and railway bridges, key economic and defence-industrial sites, media headquarters and telecommunications centres.²³

In line with limited use concepts, at the outset of a gradual nuclear escalation, Russia would likely seek to avoid attacks that would cause heavy civilian casualties (e.g. strikes on nuclear power stations). However, this does not rule out such attacks altogether, particularly if earlier attempts to coerce the adversary have failed.²⁴ Russian military planning likely emphasises the use of nuclear weapons against targets deeper within the enemy's territory, not on the battlefield. Apart from the discussion regarding the categories of targets, this is indicated by Russia's substantial investment in non-

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escalation and bringing the fighting to an end on terms acceptable to Russia. References to the limited use of nuclear weapons have appeared not only in military literature, but also in certain Russian documents—other than military and nuclear doctrines—as well as in statements by representatives of the Russian authorities and military. For example, a 2003 Ministry of Defence document on the development of the armed forces stated that "de-escalation of aggression is forcing the enemy to halt military action by a threat to deliver or by actual delivery of strikes of varying intensity with reliance on conventional and (or) nuclear weapons." See: M.B. Schneider, "[The Implications of Russia's New Nuclear Doctrine](#)," *NIPP Information Series*, No. 615, 5 February 2025, <https://nipp.org>.

²³ M. Kofman, A. Loukianova Fink, J. Edmonds, "[Russian Strategy for Escalation Management](#)," *op. cit.*, pp. 20, 42–73.

²⁴ Significantly, during the war with Ukraine, Russia has been deliberately utilising conventional munitions on a large scale to attack the civilian population. See also D. Johnson, *op. cit.*, pp. 48–54.

strategic missiles with ranges of several hundred to several thousand kilometres (e.g., the Iskander, Kalibr, and Oreshnik missiles). The Russian arsenal is less well suited to use against land-based targets on the front line, although it can also be used in this way.²⁵

Russian debates on nuclear weapons have also been characterised for years by a strong interest in concepts of “pre-emptive” use, including in regional conflicts and in the form of limited strikes.²⁶ Russian strategic culture favours countering threats before they materialise, with Russian strategists often referring to the need to avoid surprise attacks, such as the 1941 invasion by the Third Reich.²⁷ Proponents of pre-emptive strikes—sometimes confused with preventive strikes—also frequently highlight the significant technological advances in the military capabilities of the US and its allies (including, for example, hypersonic and cyber weapons).²⁸ In their view, these capabilities could make a US/NATO attack too quick and complex for the Russian military to repel or withstand, and are considered an argument in favour of striking once preparations for an attack have been detected. However, studies of Russian military discourse prior to its full-scale invasion of Ukraine indicate that the Russian military views the use of non-nuclear forces as a more realistic means of carrying out pre-emptive strikes, at least at the outset of a conflict.²⁹ Russia has threatened pre-emptive strikes against Poland, among other nations, in response to the deployment of US ballistic missile defence components on its territory.³⁰

The use of nuclear weapons and the threats of their use are central elements of Russia’s integrated approach to deterrence, intimidation and de-escalation, but they are complemented by other measures. Russia envisions a range of measures to be employed to signal determination, including its resolve to use nuclear weapons, and to test the resolve of its adversary: operations in the information domain and cyberspace, the use of force below the threshold of open conflict, as well as the use

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²⁵ Nuclear weapons presumably play a greater tactical role in the case of naval and air forces, particularly as they have at their disposal delivery systems configured for tactical missions, such as torpedoes and anti-aircraft and anti-ship missiles.

²⁶ See a discussion of these debates in the mid-2010s in: A. Velez-Green, “Russian Strategists Debate Pre-emption as Defence Against NATO Surprise Attack,” *Russia Matters*, 14 March 2018, www.russiamatters.org.

²⁷ A pre-emptive strike aims to halt an impending attack, whilst a preventive strike aims to prevent the adversary from launching an attack for which he might opt in more distant future. A pre-emptive strike therefore addresses an imminent threat, whereas a preventive strike addresses a hypothetical one.

²⁸ D. Adamsky, *The Russian Way of Deterrence: Strategic Culture, Coercion, and War*, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2024, pp. 110–113.

²⁹ M. Kofman, A. Loukianova Fink, J. Edmonds, “*Russian Strategy for Escalation Management*,” *op. cit.*, pp. 47–48; D. Adamsky, *op. cit.*, p. 111. The interest in a pre-emptive nuclear strike, but also the differences of opinion amongst the Russian elite regarding the concept, are illustrated, for example, by a remarks made in 2009 by Nikolai Patrushev, then Secretary of the Security Council of the Russian Federation. He claimed that Russia’s military doctrine was being updated to allow for the pre-emptive use of nuclear weapons. However, no such provisions were included in the public version of the document. B. Мамонтов, “Меняется Россия, меняется и ее военная доктрина,” *Известия*, 14 June 2009, <https://iz.ru>.

³⁰ A.E. Kramer, “*Russian General Makes Threat on Missile-Defence Sites*,” *The New York Times*, 3 May 2012, www.nytimes.com.

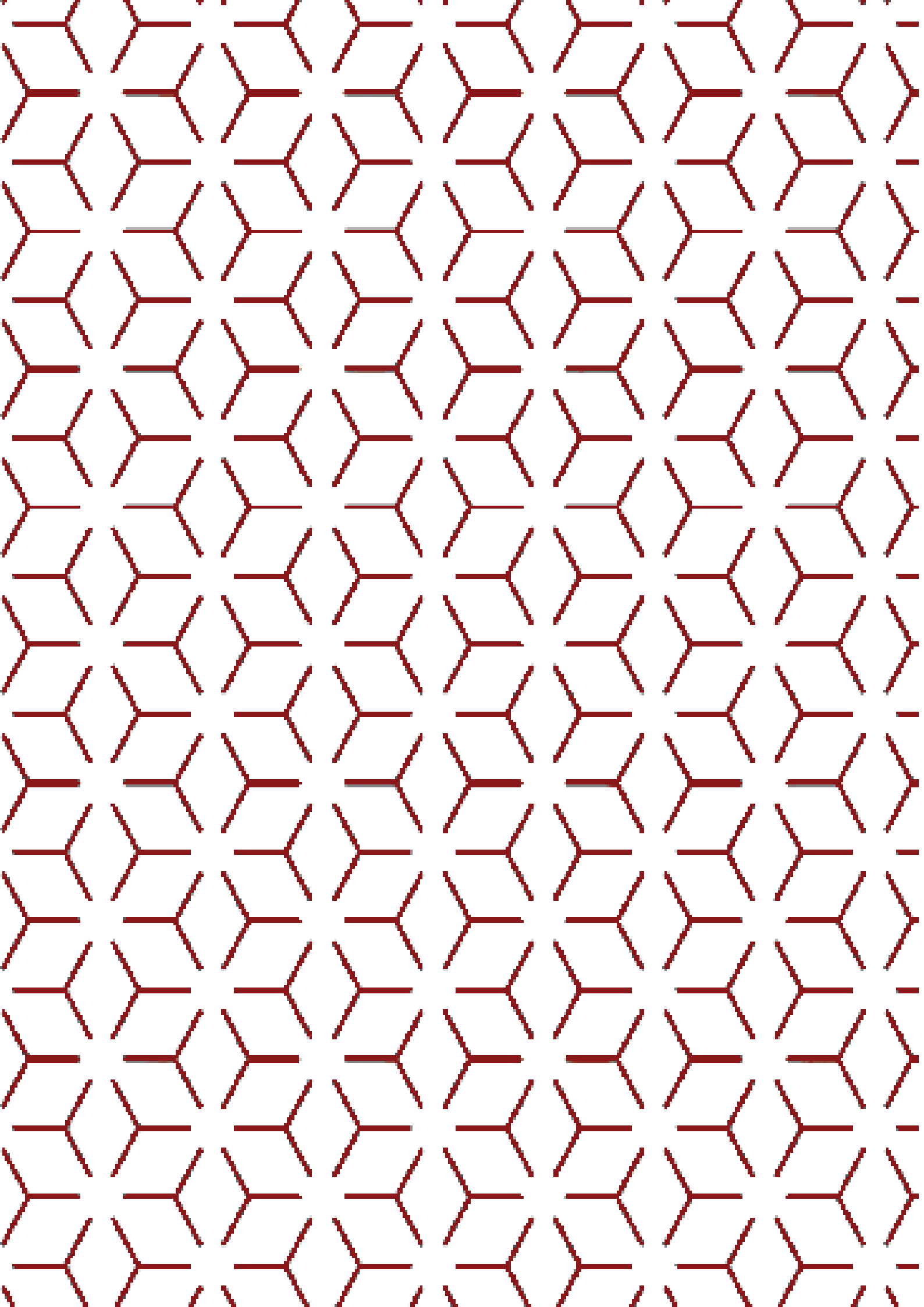
of conventional forces, including missile strikes on “critically important” military and non-military targets.³¹ In parallel to the expansion of its nuclear capabilities, Russia has long sought to also strengthen its non-nuclear options for waging war, since they carry a lower risk of provoking escalation, particularly in the early stages of a conflict. Alongside the development and introduction into service of precision-strike missiles equipped with conventional warheads, Russia introduced the concept of non-nuclear deterrence in its 2014 military doctrine.³² Significantly, most Russian missiles intended for that role are also capable of carrying nuclear warheads. Their development therefore expands Russia’s nuclear capabilities and confirms that, from Russia’s perspective, conventional precision-strike weapons will not fully replace non-strategic nuclear weapons.³³

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³¹ See D. Adamsky, *op. cit.*, pp. 26–29; M. Kofman, A. Loukianova Fink, J. Edmonds, “Russian Strategy for Escalation Management,” *op. cit.*; K. Ven Bruusgaard, “Russian Strategic Deterrence,” *Survival*, Vol. 58, No. 4, 2016.

³² “Военная доктрина Российской Федерации (утверждена Президентом Российской Федерации 25 декабря 2014 г., № Пр-2976),” Совет Безопасности Российской Федерации, www.scrf.gov.ru.

³³ See K. Zysk, *op. cit.*; D. Johnson, *op. cit.*



Nuclear intimidation in the war with Ukraine and its adaptation

Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, which began on 24 February 2022, and the accompanying escalation of confrontation with the West, have tested some of the assumptions underpinning Russia's nuclear strategy, whilst also providing an impetus for adaptation. Russia has been fuelling fears of a nuclear escalation against the West since the start of the war with Ukraine in 2014; however, since 2022, its nuclear intimidation activities have substantially intensified.³⁴ On numerous occasions, through statements by government officials as well as military actions, Russia indicated that further escalation of the conflict could lead to the use of nuclear weapons. Right before the invasion took place, large-scale exercises by Russian nuclear forces were carried out, and on the night of the attack, Putin threatened consequences "such as you have never seen in your entire history" against those who would try to "stand in our way"³⁵. Most official statements, however, were ambiguous. The most explicit threats were issued regarding the potential direct involvement of NATO states in the war. However, Russia also attempted to use the nuclear threat to deter indirect support from the West to Ukraine, such as increasing supplies of weapons. Moreover, in the later phases of the war Russia attempted to coerce Ukraine into scaling back its counteroffensive operations. Russia's nuclear intimidation campaign has also been reflected in domestic public debate surrounding the potential use of nuclear weapons. Some prominent participants in this debate outside the executive branch—such as columnists, journalists, policy experts, parliamentarians, and former military or state officials—have explicitly called for such an action.³⁶

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³⁴ On the subject of Russia's nuclear intimidation at the start of its aggression against Ukraine, see: J. Durkalec, "Nuclear-Backed "Little Green Men": Nuclear Messaging in the Ukraine Crisis," PISM Report, July 2015, www.pism.pl.

³⁵ "Address by the President of the Russian Federation," President of Russia, 24 February 2022, <http://en.kremlin.ru>. See also the chronology of Russian nuclear signals between 2022 and 2025 in: L. Horovitz, M. Smetana et al., "Russia's Nuclear Signalling in the War Against Ukraine: A Chronology of the Biden Era," SWP Working Paper, No. 3/2025, December 2025, www.swp-berlin.org.

³⁶ Within the Russian authorities, former President Dmitry Medvedev has spoken most overtly about the possibility of using nuclear weapons; throughout the full-scale war, he has served as Deputy Chairman of

Developments over the past four years show that Russia's threshold for the use of nuclear weapons is not as low as its rhetoric has often suggested. However, Russia has not yet encountered a situation in the conflict with Ukraine severe enough to prevent it from fighting using conventional forces alone, or that posed a threat to the stability of the state. Importantly, although the Russian leadership apparently considers the effects of nuclear intimidation to be insufficient, it is not being abandoned. Instead, steps are being taken to make Russia's nuclear threats more credible.

Russian nuclear intimidation has been partially effective against the West and wholly ineffective against Ukraine. NATO and EU countries were not deterred from providing Ukraine with military equipment, intelligence and training support, although fears of escalation have delayed decisions on the transfer of certain types of weaponry and on easing restrictions on its use. Russia likely regards the lack of direct involvement by NATO forces in the conflict as the greatest success of its nuclear intimidation, though this scenario was not considered by the Alliance. Fears of nuclear escalation have not deterred Ukraine from attempting to recapture its territory (including areas that Russia illegally annexed in 2022 based on "referendums"³⁷) or from carrying out air and missile strikes on Russian territory.

As Ukrainian counter-offensive operations progressed in the Summer and Autumn of 2022, Russia suggested the possibility of using nuclear weapons against Ukraine.³⁸ However, it did not take this decision, presumably at least partly because of anticipated negative international repercussions. The US and its allies warned that any nuclear strike against Ukraine would trigger catastrophic consequences for Russia. Unofficial reports indicated that Russia was told this response might not be limited to tougher sanctions and increased arms supplies to Ukraine, but could include conventional strikes against Russian forces.³⁹ It is also possible that Russia's political and economic relations with other countries would have been negatively affected, as some of its closest partners (China and India) had publicly opposed the use of nuclear weapons.

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the Russian Security Council—an advisory body to the Russian President, but without any decision-making authority over the use of nuclear weapons.

³⁷ A. Legucka, M. Piechowska, "Russia Conducts Pseudo-Referendums in Ukraine," *PISM Spotlight*, No. 124/2022, 28 September 2022, www.pism.pl.

³⁸ This was indicated both by signals sent by Russia and by statements from representatives of the US authorities and some allied states, as well as press reports, including those citing findings by US intelligence. When signing the decree on the annexation of four Ukrainian regions, Putin announced, for example, that Russia would defend them by all means at its disposal. Defence Minister Sergei Shoigu later warned against an "uncontrolled escalation" and accused Ukraine of preparing a radiological bomb attack, which the US and some of its allies interpreted as Russia preparing a pretext for the use of nuclear weapons. For further reading, see: C. Kahl, "The fall 2022 crisis," *Defense & Security Analysis*, 8 May 2026; B. Woodward, *War*, London: Simon & Schuster, 2024, pp. 150–165.

³⁹ *Ibidem*, pp. 150–65; C. Kahl, *op. cit.*; M. Seddon, J. Kynge, J.P. Rathbone, F. Schwartz, "Xi Jinping warned Vladimir Putin against nuclear attack in Ukraine," *Financial Times*, 5 July 2023, www.ft.com. See also A. Kacprzyk, "Russia Threatens Ukraine with Nuclear Weapons," *PISM Bulletin*, No. 158 (2075), 10 October 2022, www.pism.pl.

More broadly, the Russian authorities' decision not to use nuclear weapons was likely also influenced by the fact that they were not facing an irreversible defeat in the war. Using conventional forces, they had managed to halt Ukrainian counter-offensives and to drive Ukrainian troops out of the parts of the Kursk Oblast in Russia that they had occupied. Although Ukrainian strikes on targets in Russia have been costly for the country, so far, they have not threatened the physical or political survival of the Russian regime, nor resulted in significant loss of life. Furthermore, although there have been attacks which targeted Russian nuclear delivery systems (strategic bombers) and supporting assets (including early-warning radars and communications aircraft), the limited scale of the strikes has not undermined Russia's ability to carry out a nuclear retaliation. Moreover, the Russian forces and facilities targeted were largely being used to conduct conventional operations against Ukraine.

So far, Russia also appears to perceive NATO's deterrence as credible enough. It has not carried out any nuclear or conventional retaliation against states supporting Ukraine, nor has it openly attacked supply lines on their territory. Instead, it is stepping up attempts at sabotage and other hostile actions against NATO that fall below the threshold of open conflict.⁴⁰

Since the start of 2023, however, Russia has significantly stepped up its efforts to convince the NATO countries of the growing risk of it using nuclear weapons, should the tensions escalate. This is in line with calls from Russian commentators and experts who argued that failures of nuclear intimidation stem from incorrect communication on the part of Russia, and that nuclear signalling should be substantially strengthened.⁴¹ Whilst during the first year of full-scale war, Russian nuclear signalling related to the conflict consisted mainly of ambiguous statements by the authorities, in subsequent years it expanded to include statements on the deployment of nuclear weapons in Belarus, the conduct of non-strategic nuclear force exercises near the borders with Ukraine and NATO, and the suspension of inspections and data exchanges under the (now defunct) the 2010 US-Russian Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (New START). Russia also withdrew its ratification of the Comprehensive Nuclear-Test-Ban Treaty (CTBT) and signalled the possibility of resuming nuclear tests. Furthermore, it has been developing additional nuclear weapons delivery systems, including the new "Oreshnik" medium-range missile, the non-nuclear variant of which was used against Ukraine on several occasions.

The 2024 update to the nuclear doctrine was also intended to intimidate the West; the Russian authorities pointed to the need to remind Western states that supporting

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⁴⁰ See F. Bryjka, A.M. Dwyer, A. Kozioł, "White Paper on Russian Acts of Sabotage and Subversion against Members of the Council of the Baltic Sea States," PISM Report, May 2026, www.pism.pl.

⁴¹ See, in particular, S.A. Karaganov, "A Difficult but Necessary Decision," *Russia in Global Affairs*, 13 June 2023, <https://eng.globalaffairs.ru>; D.V. Trenin, "Conflict in Ukraine and Nuclear Weapons," *Russia in Global Affairs*, 22 June 2023, <https://eng.globalaffairs.ru>.

Ukraine increases the risk of the conflict escalating.⁴² Moreover, it was no coincidence that the doctrine was published at a time when the US was considering allowing Ukraine to launch attacks on Russian territory using American weaponry, with Russia attempting to dissuade it from granting permission. The doctrine's provisions mirror Vladimir Putin's threats at the time that such support would be tantamount to an act of aggression against Russia.⁴³ The updated doctrine also lowered the declared threshold for the use of nuclear weapons in response to a conventional attack. Apart from the desire to exert a psychological effect on the West in connection with the ongoing confrontation, another reason for this change may have been the weakening of Russia's conventional forces (compared to NATO's) during their involvement in the war with Ukraine. Since 2010, the threshold had applied to aggression threatening the "survival of the state," while the 2024 document replaced it with a more general "critical threat" to sovereignty or territorial integrity.⁴⁴

Furthermore, there are ongoing discussions in Russia regarding how nuclear threats can be communicated more convincingly. Part of this has been an unprecedented public debate on the merits of carrying out limited "pre-emptive" and "de-escalatory" strikes against NATO members. Such a step is advocated for by some commentators and experts, who argue that it is necessary to force the West to cease its support for Ukraine. They have cited Poland and other countries on NATO's eastern flank as potential targets for such strikes.⁴⁵ It should be noted that these ideas have met with significant opposition from other experts, including some closely associated with the Russian authorities.⁴⁶ In 2024, Putin also publicly rejected the idea of carrying out such a strike. He commented that "there is currently no such need," and that Russian nuclear weapons would only be used in "exceptional circumstances." However, he emphasised at the same time that the Russian advantage over Europe in non-strategic nuclear weapons would lead to Russia prevailing in any conflict involving their use.⁴⁷ This seems

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⁴² "Russia to change nuclear doctrine upon examination of the West's actions—senior diplomat," TASS, 1 September 2024, <https://tass.com>. See also: A. Kacprzyk, "Russia Changes Its...," *op. cit.*

⁴³ Y. Talmazan, "Putin warns NATO risks 'war' over Ukraine long-range missiles; Russia expels UK diplomats it accuses of spying," NBC News, 13 September 2024, www.nbcnews.com; A. Kacprzyk, "Russia Doubles Down on Nuclear Intimidation of NATO," *PISM Bulletin*, No. 129 (2437), 4 September 2024, www.pism.pl.

⁴⁴ Russia has thus reverted to a threshold for the use of nuclear weapons in response to a conventional attack that is closer to the definition contained in its 2000 military doctrine—namely, a situation "critical to the national security" of the Russian Federation; "Russia's Military Doctrine," Arms Control Association, www.armscontrol.org.

⁴⁵ S.A. Karaganov, "A Difficult but...," *op. cit.*; D.V. Trenin, "Conflict in Ukraine...," *op. cit.*

⁴⁶ See, for example, F.A. Lukyanov, "Why We Won't Be Able to 'Sober Up the West' with a Nuclear Bomb," *Russia in Global Affairs*, 26 June 2023. See also a summary of this discussion in: H. Notte, "The West Cannot Cure Russia's Nuclear Fever," *War on the Rocks*, 18 July 2023, <https://warontherocks.com>.

⁴⁷ "Plenary session of the St Petersburg International Economic Forum," President of Russia, 7 June 2024, <http://en.kremlin.ru>. Putin also acknowledged that he is aware of and respects the viewpoint of those who advocate the limited and early use of nuclear weapons in a conversation with one of the leading proponents of this approach, Sergei Karaganov, "Vladimir Putin Meets with Members of the Valdai Discussion Club. Transcript of the Plenary Session of the 20th Annual Meeting," Valdai Discussion Club, 5 October 2023, <https://valdaiclub.com>.

to confirm the view that Russia does not regard launching even a limited nuclear strike as an easy decision or as a guarantee of achieving its objectives, although it does not rule out such a move. One should also bear in mind that the Russian authorities try to balance their efforts to intimidate the West with a desire to present the image of a responsible and defensive-minded power to parts of Western elites and third-party states. Furthermore, other ways of “restoring the fear” of nuclear war—preceding potential use of nuclear weapons—are being discussed in Russia.⁴⁸ For example, an official return to conducting nuclear tests has not only been debated by experts and pundits, but also named as an option by Putin and other representatives of the Russian authorities.⁴⁹

Significantly, articles written by officers of the Russian nuclear forces also indicate that, following the full-scale invasion of Ukraine, work began on new operational concepts designed to better demonstrate Russia’s nuclear capabilities and its determination to use them.⁵⁰ Among the topics under discussion by the Russian military is the option of a pre-emptive use of nuclear weapons, viewed as a means of countering a strategic (disarming or decapitating) conventional missile strike by the US.⁵¹ Official statements suggest that, during exercises in May of 2026, a pre-emptive strike was practised, with the Russian Ministry of Defence describing these manoeuvres as concerning the preparation and use of nuclear weapons “in the face of the threat of aggression,” rather than in response to it.⁵²

It should also be noted that Russian threats and other references to nuclear weapons serve a domestic political purpose: they are intended to demonstrate Russia’s power to the public, including by emphasising its status as the only state with a nuclear arsenal comparable to that of the United States. Such political rhetoric by representatives of the Russian political elite has taken on added significance as a means to compensate for the failures of Russia’s conventional forces in the war with Ukraine.

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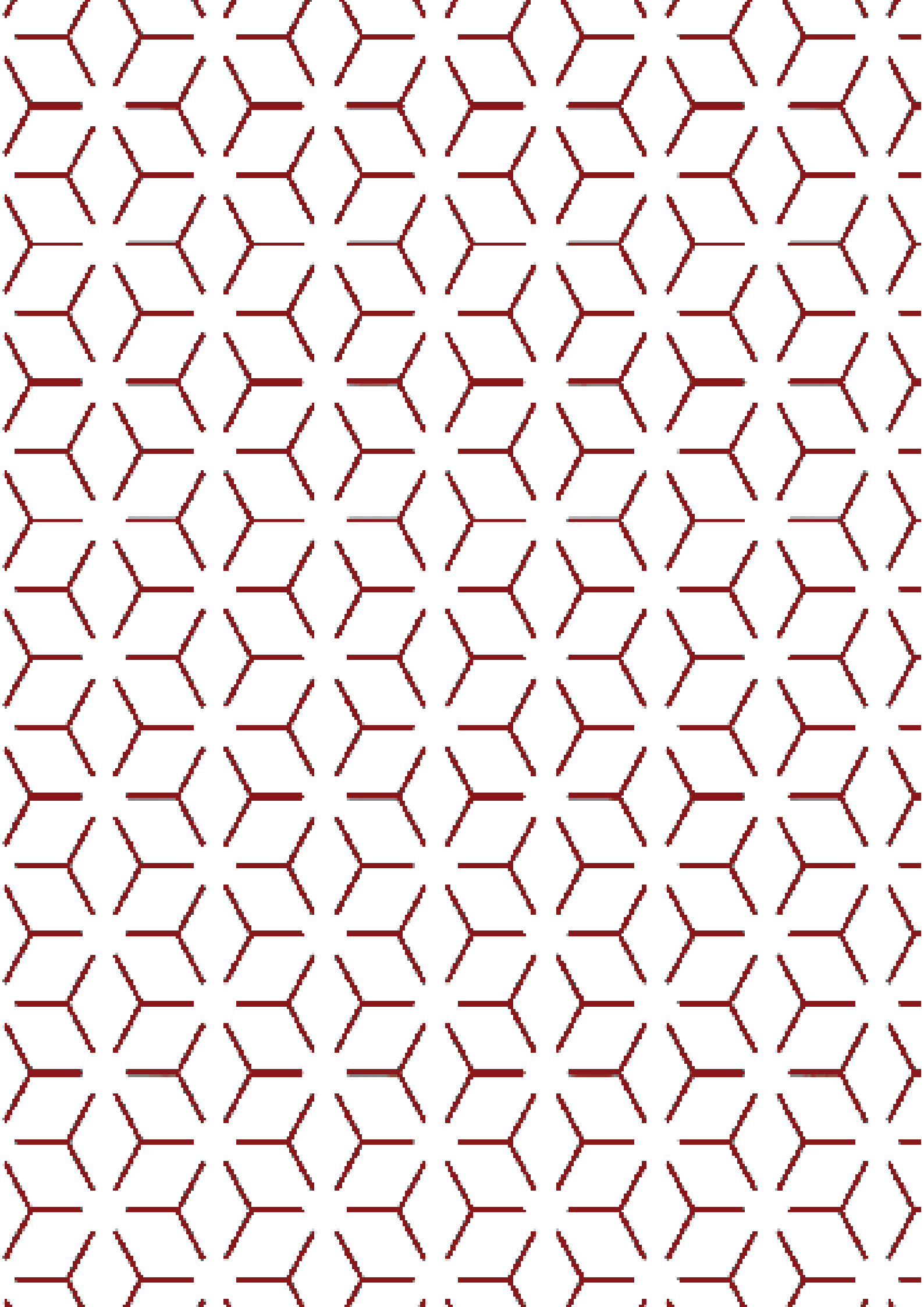
⁴⁸ See, for example, S.A. Karaganov, D.V. Trenin, S.I. Avakyan, *From Restraining to Detering: Nuclear Weapons, Geopolitics, Coalition Strategy*, Moscow 2024, <https://karaganov.ru>.

⁴⁹ “Plenary session of the St Petersburg International Economic Forum,” President of Russia, 7 June 2024, *op. cit.*; V. Soldatkin, M. Trevelyan, “Putin orders proposals on possible Russian nuclear test,” Reuters, 5 November 2025, www.reuters.com. Since 2019, the US has accused Russia of secretly conducting low-yield nuclear test explosions despite a declared moratorium on such tests.

⁵⁰ D. Adamsky, “Quo Vadis, Russian Deterrence? Strategic Culture and Coercion Innovations,” *International Security*, Vol. 49, No. 3, 2025, pp. 64–66, <https://direct.mit.edu>. See also: L. Wachs, “Russian nuclear roulette? Elites and public debates on nuclear weapons in Moscow after Ukraine,” *The Nonproliferation Review*, Vol. 30, No. 4–6, 2024, pp. 186–188, www.tandfonline.com; S. Kaushal, D. Dolzikova, “The Evolution of Russian Nuclear Doctrine,” RUSI, 12 August 2025, www.rusi.org.

⁵¹ Fears of such attacks are reflected in the updated nuclear doctrine’s expansion of the list of airborne attack systems whose launch could prompt Russia to use nuclear weapons (previously, this list included only ballistic missiles, but since 2024 it also includes drones, aircraft and cruise and hypersonic missiles).

⁵² Russian Ministry of Defence, Telegram, 19 May 2026, https://t.me/mod_russia_en.



Russian nuclear capabilities in Belarus

The decision to deploy Russian non-strategic nuclear weapons in Belarus was the result of the deepening military integration between the two countries following the rigged 2020 Belarusian presidential elections and of Belarusian support for Russia's 2022 full-scale aggression against Ukraine. These two events led to a sharp deterioration of relations between Western countries and Belarus, and subsequently with Russia. The war against Ukraine also made it necessary for Russia to emphasise the alleged threats posed by NATO countries, which it regards as adversaries. Although Russian statements claim that deploying nuclear weapons in Belarus is intended to strengthen deterrence against the West, in practice it also served an aggressive purpose of intimidation: facilitating the war against Ukraine and limiting international support for the country.⁵³

Article 22 of the military doctrine of the Union State of Belarus and Russia, adopted in 2021 and published in February 2022, states that "the nuclear weapons of the Russian Federation will remain an important factor in preventing the outbreak of armed conflicts of a nuclear nature and armed conflicts involving the use of conventional weapons,"⁵⁴ a signal directed at NATO countries and Ukraine. This message was reinforced by the exercises conducted by the Russian nuclear forces on 19 February 2022, personally overseen by Vladimir Putin and observed by Alexander Lukashenka. Another step in nuclear signalling by the two countries was the joint exercises conducted in May 2026. During a meeting between the two leaders on 25 June 2022, Putin announced that Belarusian Su-25 attack aircraft would be adapted to carry nuclear bombs and that their crews would receive appropriate training, as well as that Iskander ballistic and cruise missile launchers were being transferred to Belarusian forces to serve as non-

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⁵³ Putin described the deployment of nuclear weapons in Belarus as a deterrent against anyone who might be considering inflicting a "strategic defeat" on Russia. This was a reference to wording used by representatives of Joe Biden's administration and some NATO member states and officials in the context of Russian aggression against Ukraine; "Plenary session of the St Petersburg International Economic Forum," President of Russia, 16 June 2023, *op. cit.*

⁵⁴ "Военная доктрина Союза утверждена постановлением Высшего Государственного Совета Союзного государства от 4 ноября 2021 г. № 5," Союзное Государство. Официальный сайт Постоянного комитета Союзного Государства, 4 November 2021, <https://посткомсг.рф>.

Map 1

Possible deployment sites of nuclear forces in Belarus



Source: map prepared by authors.



strategic nuclear weapons delivery systems.⁵⁵ The process of preparing the Belarusian forces for the potential use of Russian nuclear weapons was completed a year later.

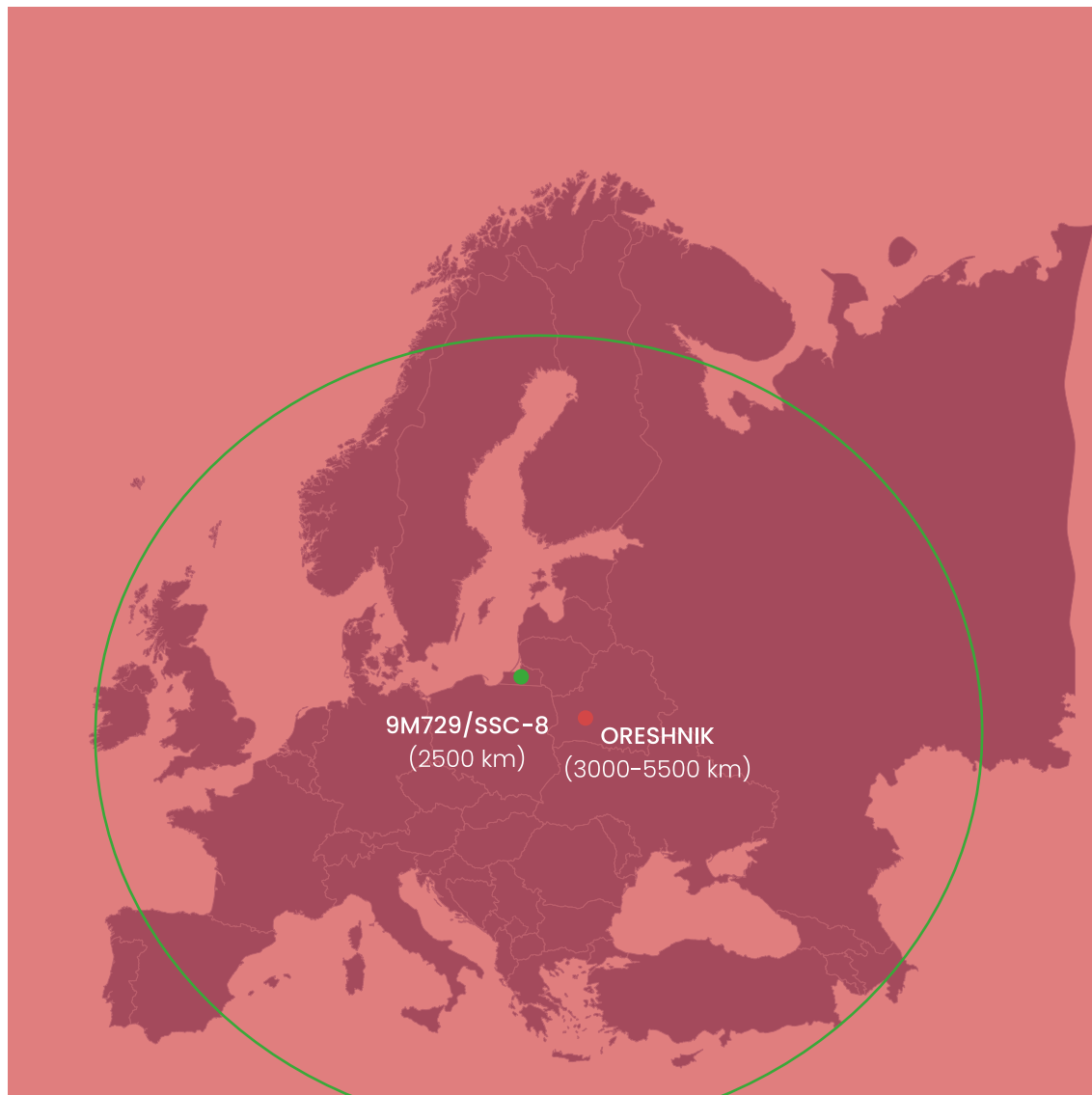
On 25 March 2023, Vladimir Putin announced the deployment of tactical nuclear weapons to Belarus.⁵⁶ The Russian Ministry of Defence justified this decision by citing the United States' refusal to withdraw nuclear weapons from Europe and the alleged threat of NATO. Consequently, on 25 May 2023 in Minsk, the defence ministers of Russia and Belarus, Sergei Shoigu and Viktor Khrenin, signed documents setting out the

⁵⁵ "Meeting with President of Belarus Alexander Lukashenko," President of Russia, 25 June 2022, <http://en.kremlin.ru>.

⁵⁶ "Россия разместит в Беларуси тактическое ядерное оружие, заявил Путин," Российская служба BBC, 25 March 2023, www.bbc.com.

Map 2

Ranges of Oreshnik and 9M729 missiles from Belarus and Kaliningrad Oblast



Source: map prepared by authors.

conditions for the storage of Russian nuclear weapons in a special storage facility on Belarusian territory.⁵⁷ On 7 June 2023, Putin announced that the first nuclear warheads had already been delivered,⁵⁸ and on 25 April 2024, Lukashenka stated that several

⁵⁷ А. Никольский, Н. Гасымов, "Россия и Белоруссия подписали документы о размещении ядерного оружия," *Ведомости*, 26 May 2023, www.vedomosti.ru.

⁵⁸ "Путин сообщил о доставке первых ядерных зарядов РФ в Белоруссию," ТАСС, 16 June 2023, <https://tass.ru>.

dozen were now in Belarus,⁵⁹ although definitive verification of the deployment is impossible with publicly available information.

Furthermore, Article 18 of the revised version of the Russian nuclear doctrine, published on 19 November 2024, explicitly states that “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.”⁶⁰ On 6 December 2024, Belarus and Russia signed an agreement on security guarantees, Article 6 of which states that the decision to use Russian nuclear weapons located on Belarusian territory for its defence shall be taken in accordance with the procedure established by both states.⁶¹ In practice, though, the decision will rest with the Russian side.

Belarusian delivery systems for Russian nuclear warheads include Su-25 aircraft and Iskander-M short-range missile systems transferred to the country. Moreover, Belarus likely hosts Russian Oreshnik medium-range missile systems, which are also nuclear-capable. The Su-25 aircraft are operated from the 116th Guards Assault Air Base, located in Lida (Hrodna Region, near the border with Lithuania). In 2024, Belarus announced that Belarusian pilots and ground crews had completed a full training programme in the use of tactical nuclear weapons.⁶² Belarusian airfields capable of receiving Russian strategic bombers include: Machulishchy (near Minsk, home to the 50th Air Base), Lida, Baranavichy (Brest Region, 61st Fighter Aviation Base) and Luninyets (Brest Region). The Iskander missiles are under the command of the 465th Missile Brigade, with headquarters in Asipovichy (Mahilyow Region). It is also highly likely that a special storage facility for nuclear warheads has been built there.⁶³ Meanwhile, the Oreshnik systems are believed to be deployed in eastern Belarus, probably at the site of the former Krichev-6 airbase in the Mahilyow Region near the town of Krichev/Krychaw, as indicated by satellite imagery.⁶⁴ The base is located approximately 5 km from the Belarusian border with Russia.

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⁵⁹ “Лукашенко: в Белоруссии разместили “несколько десятков” российских ядерных боеприпасов,” ТАСС, 25 April 2024, <https://tass.ru>.

⁶⁰ “Указ Президента Российской Федерации от 19.11.2024...,” *op. cit.*

⁶¹ “Договор между Российской Федерацией и Республикой Беларусь о гарантиях безопасности в рамках Союзного государства,” Министерство иностранных дел Российской Федерации, 6 December 2024, www.mid.ru.

⁶² “В Белоруссии заявили, что военные прошли весь цикл подготовки по применению ТЯО,” ТАСС, 2 June 2024, <https://tass.ru>.

⁶³ H. Kristensen, M. Korda, “Depot In Belarus Shows New Upgrades Possibly For Russian Nuclear Warhead Storage,” Federation of American Scientists, 14 March 2024, <https://fas.org>.

⁶⁴ “Satellite Imagery Points To Possible Russian Oreshnik Missile Site In Belarus,” Radio Free Europe / Radio Liberty Belarus Service, 11 February 2026, www.rferl.org.

Alexander Lukashenka has on several occasions suggested that the Russian tactical nuclear weapons stationed in Belarus could be used against NATO countries and/or Ukraine, should they decide to attack Belarus or the Union State of Belarus and Russia. As far back as April 2010, Lukashenka claimed that the withdrawal of nuclear weapons from Belarus following the collapse of the USSR was a huge mistake, emphasising that he had been forced to accept it under pressure from Russia and the US. Therefore, Lukashenka regards the redeployment of Russian nuclear weapons in Belarus as a personal success.

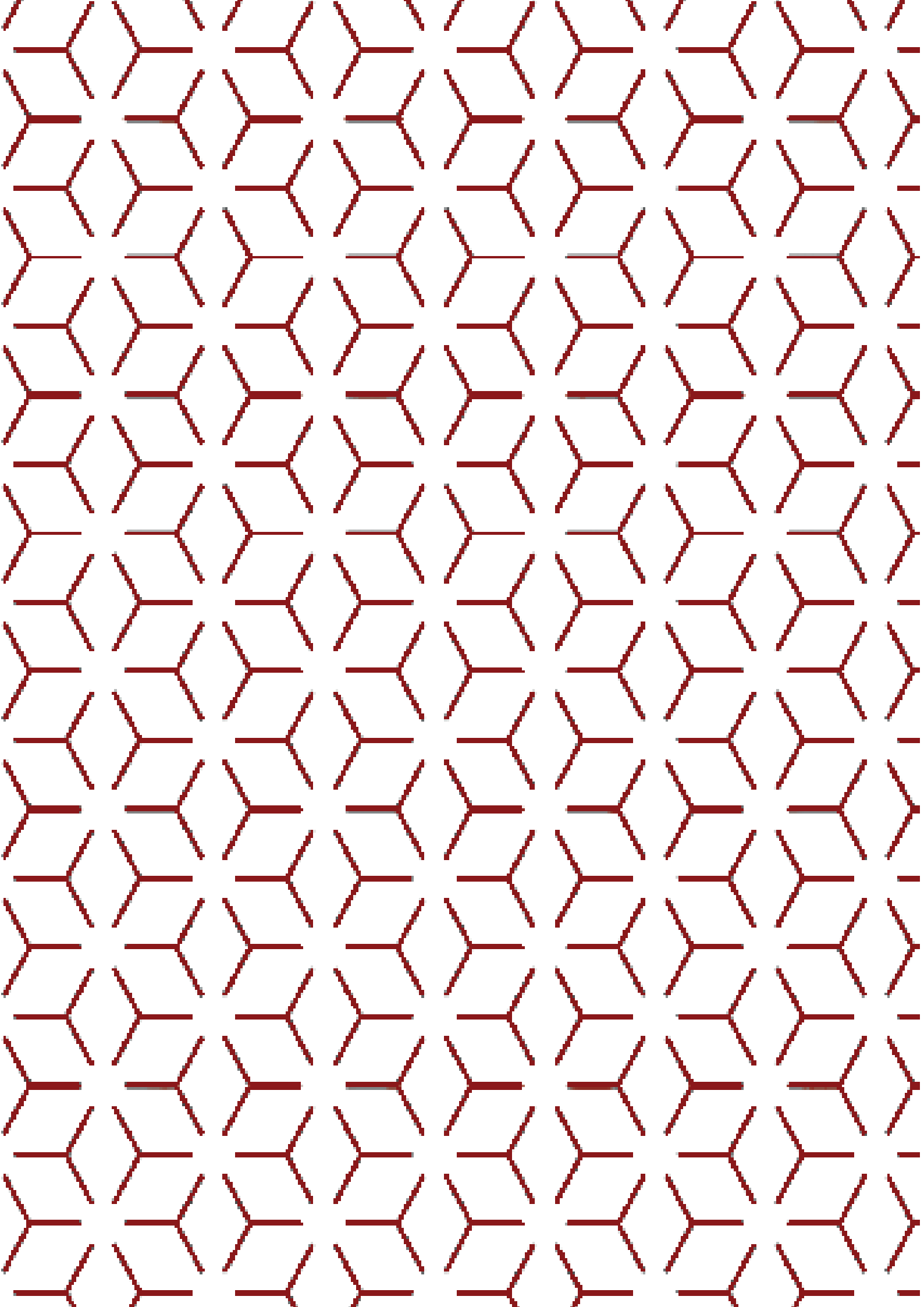
The presence of these weapons in Belarus poses additional risks to the region. With an official range of 500 km, Iskander-M ballistic missiles could reach most of Poland and Ukraine, as well as parts of the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Hungary and Romania, thereby providing additional strike options. Russia's aggression against Ukraine, as well as the joint Belarusian-Russian military exercises, have demonstrated that, from a military perspective, Russia considers Belarusian territory an extension of its own. Consequently, despite formal agreements, should Russia decide to use tactical nuclear weapons, the Belarusian authorities are unlikely to have any meaningful input. Furthermore, Russia could deliberately exploit Belarusian territory to launch a nuclear attack, in the hope that any retaliation would remain confined to Belarus.

Beyond hosting elements of its nuclear forces, Belarus also supports Russia's nuclear signalling in other ways. Belarusian units with nuclear-capable weapon systems joined Russian non-strategic nuclear forces' exercises in June 2024 and May 2026. In the latter case, Belarus commenced operations a day earlier than Russia, on 18 May 2026. Furthermore, nuclear-capable systems operated by Russian forces appeared in Belarus. Russian bombers conducted patrols over Belarus during the migrant crisis on the Polish-Belarusian border in the autumn of 2021, and in early 2022, just before the invasion of Ukraine. In 2022, Russia also deployed and used its own Iskander launchers to carry out conventional strikes against Ukraine from Belarusian territory. Attention should also be paid to the coordinated messaging by Russia and Belarus regarding their readiness to use nuclear weapons even during a low-intensity conflict, as reflected by the scenario of the "Zapad 2025" exercises.⁶⁵ Similar signals were also sent by other members of the Collective Security Treaty Organisation during the "Interaction 2025" exercises, which took place in Belarus in September 2025, immediately preceding "Zapad."⁶⁶ Consequently, if a full-scale conflict threatens the Union State of Belarus and Russia, the actual threshold for the use of nuclear weapons could be considerably lower than formal criteria laid out in the official strategic documents of both states.

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⁶⁵ A.M. Dyner, "Zapad 2025: Russia, Belarus Signalling Military Capacity Despite the War in Ukraine," *PISM Bulletin*, No. 101 (2602), 23 September 2025, <https://pism.pl>.

⁶⁶ A.M. Dyner, "CSTO Exercises in Belarus a Display of Unity and Strength," *PISM Spotlight*, No. 63/2025, 8 September 2025, <https://pism.pl>.



Russia's nuclear capabilities in Kaliningrad Oblast

Russia faces no legal or practical restrictions to the deployment of nuclear weapons within Kaliningrad Oblast. The territory possesses appropriate, modernised nuclear storage infrastructure and a range of delivery systems are stationed there. This points to a high probability that nuclear weapons are either already deployed within the region or could be rapidly moved there in the event of a crisis, despite explicit official denials following media reports in 2000 that Russian warheads had been transferred there.⁶⁷ In 2022, Lithuanian Defence Minister Arvydas Anušauskas stated that nuclear weapons were present within the region.⁶⁸ In 2024, Polish Foreign Minister Radosław Sikorski stated that they were deployed near the city of Kaliningrad, and later that year added that this referred to “a storage facility for around 100 tactical nuclear warheads.”⁶⁹

The presence of non-strategic nuclear weapons in Kaliningrad Oblast would be consistent with Russia's strategy to intimidate NATO and regional states. The implicit threat of their use—amplified by their presumed presence in the Oblast—would aim to deter attacks on Russian military targets or any attempts to attack or seize the territory. Such actions are operationally feasible given NATO's superiority in conventional forces.⁷⁰ The Russian leadership may reason that Western assumptions regarding the presence of nuclear warheads will complicate the political decision-making process regarding potential strikes on targets in Kaliningrad Oblast in case of Russian aggression against NATO member states. In the event of a conflict, Russia may also signal that the loss of control over the region would constitute a “critical threat to its territorial integrity,” possibly meeting one of the conditions for the use of nuclear weapons set out in its nuclear doctrine. Russia may also explicitly announce the presence of nuclear warheads in Kaliningrad during a crisis. This would serve as a means of intimidation and signalling, emphasising Russia's readiness and capability for nuclear escalation in the face of a conventional conflict.

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⁶⁷ H. Kristensen, “Non-Strategic Nuclear Weapons,” Federation of American Scientists, Special Report No. 3, May 2012, pp. 70–73, <https://fas.org>.

⁶⁸ “Lithuanian officials puzzled by Russia's threat to deploy nuclear weapons in Kaliningrad,” LRT, 14 April 2022, www.lrt.lt.

⁶⁹ N. Ostiller, “Polish foreign minister: Berlin within range of Russian missiles,” *Kyiv Independent*, 31 January 2024, <https://kyivindependent.com>; M. Kulakova, “Polish Foreign Minister Claims Russia Could Store 100 Nuclear Warheads in Kaliningrad,” *United24*, 12 June 2024, <https://united24media.com>.

⁷⁰ There could therefore be similarities to the scenario of the “Zapad-99” exercises, during which the inability of Russian conventional forces to repel an attack on Kaliningrad led to the simulated use of nuclear weapons; see: J. Kipp, “Russia's Nonstrategic...,” *op. cit.*

Historically, Russia has already used the threat of deploying nuclear-capable Iskander missile systems in the region as a nuclear signalling instrument. Between 2008 and 2017, it framed this upcoming deployment as a direct response to the construction of a US missile defence base in Poland.⁷¹ Through this narrative, it sought not only to intimidate Poland and the Baltic states, but also to convince Western states and societies that the actions of the United States were increasing the risk of war. In reality, however, the deployment of Iskanders was part of a nationwide process of modernisation and rearmament of Russian missile forces. It was officially completed for the 152nd Missile Brigade in the Oblast in 2018.⁷²

Above all, Russian nuclear operational planning concerning Kaliningrad Oblast may be most constrained by the prospect of NATO forces using conventional weapons to hinder or rapidly neutralise Russia's ability to use nuclear weapons from the Oblast. On the one hand, this is an argument against deploying a large number of nuclear warheads in the Oblast. But, on the other hand, Russia may equally consider using Kaliningrad as a nuclear launchpad for a "pre-emptive" strike, either out of fear of losing its nuclear strike capability during later phases of a war, or to gain an operational advantage from the outset.

The nuclear warhead and munitions storage facility near Kulikovo, north-west of the city of Kaliningrad, has been thoroughly modernised. According to satellite imagery, the refurbishment took place in several stages, beginning with the reinforcement of external security systems in the 2000s, followed by the reconstruction of the bunker used to store warheads, and culminating in the further expansion of the facility's security system between 2016 and 2020.⁷³ The modernisation of the facility's security measures followed a similar pattern to measures carried out at such sites in other parts of Russia and indicates that it is being maintained in a state of readiness. It is possible that the facility is used to store warheads and nuclear munitions for all units deployed in the region, not just one branch of the armed forces.⁷⁴

Russia has a range of dual-capable weapon systems in Kaliningrad Oblast, intended for conventional operations but also capable of delivering non-strategic nuclear weapons. The 152nd Missile Brigade, stationed in Chernyakhovsk, is equipped with Iskander missile systems, including Iskander-M (9M723) ballistic missiles and 9M728 cruise missiles with a nominal range of up to 500 km, and possibly also the 9M729 variant with a range of up to 2,500 km. Missiles with a range of 500 km can strike Poland, Lithuania, Latvia, most of

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⁷¹ P. Żochowski, "Iskander missiles in Kaliningrad: a constant element of Russia's policy of intimidation," *OSW Analyses*, 11 October 2016, www.osw.waw.pl.

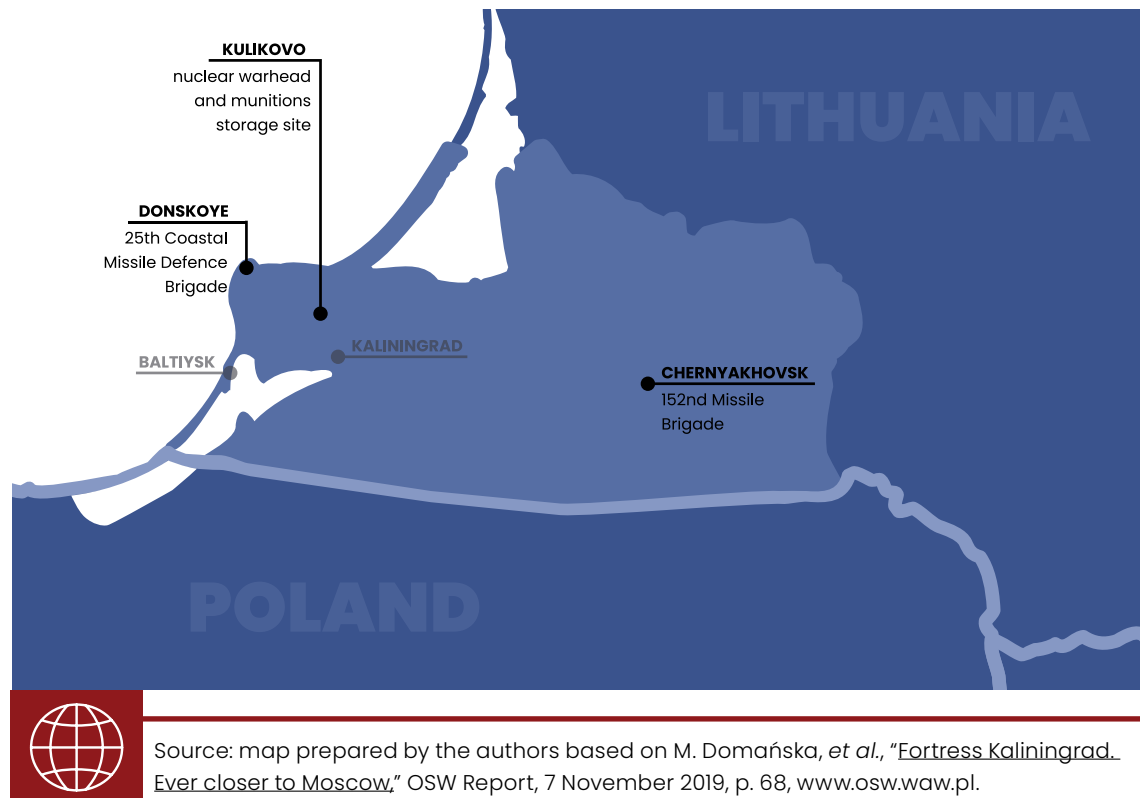
⁷² S. Sukhankin, "The End of 'Hide and Seek': Russian Iskanders Permanently in Kaliningrad," *Jamestown Eurasia Daily Monitor*, Vol. 15, No. 28, 23 February 2018, <https://jamestown.org>.

⁷³ H. Kristensen, "Russia Upgrades Nuclear Weapons Storage Site In Kaliningrad," *Federation of American Scientists*, 18 June 2018, <https://fas.org>; H. Kristensen, M. Korda, E. Johns, M. Knight-Boyle, "Nuclear Notebook: The changing nuclear landscape in Europe," *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, 10 December 2025, <https://thebulletin.org>.

⁷⁴ H. Kristensen, M. Korda, E. Johns, M. Knight-Boyle, "Nuclear Notebook," *op. cit.*

Map 3

Likely bases with nuclear forces in the Kaliningrad Oblast



Estonia, as well as parts of Sweden, Denmark and Germany,⁷⁵ thus opening up their use in various escalation scenarios, including those involving nuclear weapons.

Other units stationed in Kaliningrad Oblast may also be equipped with nuclear weapons, although their primary purpose appears to be the conduct of conventional operations. Nuclear-capable Kalibr and Moskit missiles are deployed on ships of the Baltic Fleet, and some missiles used by the S-300 and S-400 air defence systems in the region may be capable of carrying nuclear warheads. Russia has also deployed Bal and Bastion-P anti-ship missile systems in the region, which are in service with the 25th Coastal Missile Defence Brigade (Donskoye). P-800 Oniks missiles, in service with the Bastion system, are capable of striking land-based targets and can carry nuclear warheads. The Su-24M aircraft stationed in the region can also be capable of carrying nuclear weapons, as can the Kinzhal missiles with a range of up to 2,000 km, in service on the MiG-31K aircraft stationed in the Oblast since 2022.⁷⁶

In contrast to the training activities in Belarus, none of the Russian exercises organised in recent years within Kaliningrad Oblast has been explicitly presented by Russia as nuclear

⁷⁵ "Where Russia's Iskander Ballistic Missile from Kaliningrad Can Reach," *Defense Express*, 13 September 2025, <https://en.defence-ua.com>.

⁷⁶ "Moscow Reportedly Moves Three Warplanes With Hypersonic Missiles To Kaliningrad Exclave," *Radio Free Europe / Radio Liberty*, 18 August 2022, www.rferl.org.

Map 4

Estimated range of Iskander missiles deployed in Belarus and Kaliningrad Oblast



Source: map prepared by the authors on the basis of: T. Wright, W. Alberque, "The credibility and implications of Russia's missile and nuclear proposal to Belarus," International Institute for Strategic Studies, 21 July 2022, www.iiss.org.



force manoeuvres. Baltic Fleet units took part in nuclear forces exercises in May 2026, though these were apparently not vessels stationed at the Baltiysk base in Kaliningrad Oblast. This may reflect Russia's desire to maintain strategic ambiguity over the actual presence of nuclear warheads in the region. Still, dual-capable systems stationed there are undergoing intensive training, for example in May 2022 and during the "Zapad" exercises in September 2025. During the latter, Russia conducted simulated (electronic) launches using the Iskander ballistic missiles, which some media outlets interpreted as a nuclear warning to Poland and NATO⁷⁷.

⁷⁷ "Russia Simulates Nuclear Strikes Near the EU," *The Moscow Times*, 5 May 2022, www.themoscowtimes.com; K. Romik, "Wyrzutnie rakiet Iskander niedaleko granicy z Polską. Generał Polko: One zawsze były używane jako straszak," *Gazeta Wyborcza*, 13 September 2025, <https://wiadomosci.gazeta.pl>.

Consequences for NATO

Contrary to official statements, Russia not only leverages nuclear weapons to deter aggression, but also for intimidation, including attempts to discourage NATO countries from supporting Ukraine. Nevertheless, any decision by Russia to use nuclear weapons would not merely be an automatic consequence of certain conditions being met, but would result from calculations by its leadership. The provisions of the official nuclear doctrine leave ample room for interpretation, and can serve as a pretext to justify the use of nuclear weapons in a wide range of situations. At the same time, it is most likely that the Russian authorities currently regard nuclear use as a last resort. Despite various signals to the contrary, they do not seem to take a reckless approach to nuclear escalation, nor do they view nuclear weapons as a guarantee of victory.

Nonetheless, one must account for the risk that Russia might use nuclear weapons not only in response to an existential threat and attacks on vital high-value targets on its territory (leadership, key elements of its nuclear forces, nuclear power stations), but also as a means to prevent conventional defeat in a regional European conflict. This is in part because such an outcome could be seen as a threat to the political stability of the regime. A key factor in Russia's assessment of the costs and benefits of such a move would be the potential international response and the associated risks, particularly the likelihood of the retaliatory use of nuclear weapons by the US and other NATO members.

Several factors could heighten the risk of Russia initiating a conflict with NATO—a clash which could escalate to the use of nuclear weapons. Victory in the war with Ukraine would be seen by Russia as proof that, when used appropriately, nuclear intimidation is effective. A reduction in US involvement in NATO could embolden Russia to test the Alliance's effectiveness and solidarity even more strongly. This risk will be especially high if there is a drastic reduction in American military presence in the eastern part of the Alliance or if the US becomes embroiled in a major conflict in another region (particularly in the Indo-Pacific). Furthermore, the absence of a robust response from European states to Russian nuclear threats may be interpreted by Russia as a sign that Alliance members are paralysed by the prospect of nuclear war. Believing that the fear of nuclear escalation will deter some NATO members from mounting a strong response and supporting the targeted countries, Russia might risk launching a conventional attack on NATO's eastern flank. There is also the danger that confidence in its ability

to contain escalation through nuclear deterrence will encourage Russia to pursue increasingly aggressive actions below the threshold of open conflict. This could lead to an unintended armed clash with NATO, such as if an act of sabotage on Alliance territory results in casualties and triggers a military response.

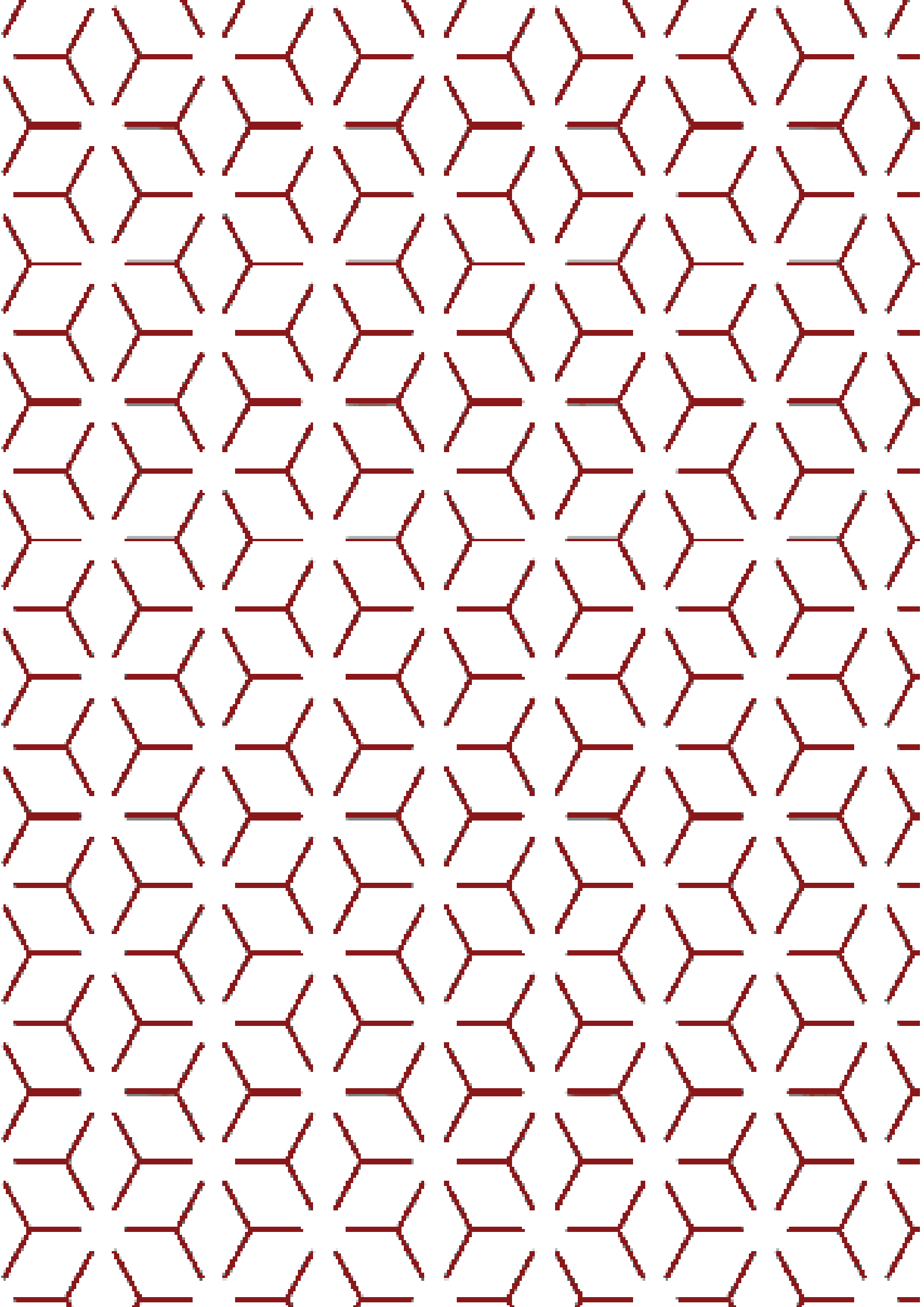
As intensified nuclear signalling becomes a permanent feature of Russia's strategic communication towards NATO, it will become increasingly difficult to interpret the actual significance of these signals. Such moves may represent routine posturing as a part of confrontation with the West, or foreshadow actual escalation. Consequently, they should be assessed alongside the dynamics of the political and military situation, and statements by the Russian authorities. Such signalling may aim to escalate tensions with NATO countries, to probe their reactions (in the hope of exposing divisions among them), or to serve as a propaganda reaction to their support for Ukraine or deployments of additional forces or new weapons systems by NATO. The motivations behind irregular nuclear force exercises may be particularly unclear, and their signalling value muddled. In turn, any signs indicating an increase in the readiness level of nuclear forces would be of great importance (including the dispersal of nuclear-capable aircraft and launchers, moving them to combat positions, and arming non-strategic systems with warheads). Another clear indication of increased danger of escalation would be direct threats linked to current events—for example, in the form of an ultimatum.

Poland and other central-eastern flank NATO countries would be particularly exposed to the consequences of Russian use of nuclear weapons in a conflict in Europe—whether as a means of intimidation or in combat operations against NATO. These countries represent the primary targets for nuclear systems deployed in Kaliningrad Oblast and Belarus, which provide Russia with additional strike options and can play an important signalling role. Strikes by weapons deployed in these forward locations would dramatically reduce the reaction time available for Russia's adversaries, while enabling Russia to strike a greater number of targets. This would raise the difficulty of defending against Russian attacks and allow some of Russia's longer-range systems to be used against other targets. While Russia may deploy additional nuclear delivery systems to Kaliningrad Oblast and Belarus during a crisis, the already ongoing presence of such assets there allows for faster use at the outset of a conflict, potentially also in support of a “pre-emptive” strike. The deployment of nuclear delivery systems in Kaliningrad Oblast and Belarus, as well as conducting exercises involving their use, is clearly intended to signal the possibility of using nuclear weapons against NATO countries.

Potential nuclear strikes launched from Belarus and/or Kaliningrad Oblast against countries on the eastern flank could be intended to reach operational objectives by targeting troops on the front line, or other, more remote forces and installations. Even if a regional NATO member state is not the initial target of Russian aggression, Russia could still strike infrastructure on its territory used to provide support to other countries (such as the deployment of troops to the Baltic states or the supply of

military equipment to Ukraine through Poland), including airfields, ports and other key transport hubs. Nuclear strikes in the region could also target allied forces, US missile defence systems, air bases, and long-range missile forces.

The primary aim of potential Russian nuclear strikes on NATO would likely be to coerce it into ending the conflict on terms acceptable to Russia. As such, they could take the form of either demonstrative attacks or more severe strikes against military and economic targets. The countries on the eastern flank would be a more likely target than other NATO members—because they lack their own nuclear deterrents (unlike the US, France, and the UK), and because Russia is unlikely to consider these states as potential participants in talks on the post-war order in Europe.



Recommendations

Russia's intensified attempts to intimidate NATO countries, including the bolstering of Russian nuclear capabilities near the borders of Poland and other countries on the central-eastern flank, require the North Atlantic Alliance to further adapt and strengthen its nuclear deterrence. This will help NATO signal that it possesses credible response options—including nuclear ones—to counter any Russian use of non-strategic nuclear weapons, and that it will not yield to nuclear blackmail even under the most adverse circumstances, such as the US becoming involved in a conflict outside Europe. The overarching aim of such measures should be to convince Russia that the use of nuclear weapons will not guarantee it escalation control, and may trigger a severe response. This will be facilitated by further expanding the range of available nuclear and conventional response options on NATO's part, tailored to various scenarios involving the use of nuclear weapons by Russia.

NATO's nuclear mission would be strengthened by extending nuclear sharing to additional countries, including Poland or other Alliance members on the eastern flank, firstly by certifying their F-35A aircraft to carry US nuclear weapons, and subsequently by stationing such weapons on the territory of those countries. This would make it more difficult for Russia to plan or attempt to destroy US nuclear assets deployed in Europe before they can be used by NATO. It would also send a further signal of the Alliance's readiness to respond to Russian nuclear threats. NATO could also modify the scope of the annual Steadfast Noon nuclear exercises so that they also explicitly cover operations on the eastern flank, including exercising the dispersal of aircraft capable of carrying nuclear weapons.

NATO should also begin work as soon as possible on a new generation of non-strategic nuclear weapons delivery systems, such as missiles launched from aircraft and/or mobile land-based launchers. In light of Russia's development of additional weapon systems that can threaten the Alliance's air bases and possible advances in Russian air defences, these new capabilities would provide more survivable and credible options in the future for carrying out limited nuclear counterstrikes.⁷⁸

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⁷⁸ See W. Alberque, A. Kacprzyk, "[More Pillars Needed: Ten Options for Europe to Improve NATO's Nuclear Deterrence](#)," Stimson Centre, 2 October 2024, [www.stimson.org](#); A. Kacprzyk, "[NATO's Nuclear Adaptation: Rationales for Expanding the Force Posture in Europe](#)," PISM Report, November 2023, [www.pism.pl](#).

Another important part of efforts by NATO countries should be to undermine Russia's confidence in its operational capabilities to use non-strategic nuclear weapons in Europe, particularly in the form of limited strikes. Given the geographical proximity, the ability to track and identify targets and the existing and emerging conventional precision strike capabilities of NATO member states, it would be possible to neutralise at least part of the Russian nuclear capabilities deployed in Belarus and Kaliningrad Oblast. This applies to nuclear warhead storage sites, elements of the command and control and nuclear warhead transportation systems, as well as some of the dual-capable delivery systems, such as mobile Iskander missile launchers. Such dual-capable systems would already be legitimate targets in the conventional phase of the conflict, as they could be used for non-nuclear attacks against Poland and its allies. Planning and signalling (e.g. through exercise scenarios) the capability and readiness for conducting conventional operations of this kind may strengthen NATO nuclear deterrence, even though Russia will retain the option to use other elements of its nuclear arsenal. Further improvements to the Alliance's air and missile defence system may also complicate Russian calculations.

An important reinforcement of deterrence, including nuclear deterrence, would be the expansion of the Allies' capabilities to carry out non-nuclear precision strikes against targets deep within Russia (at a range of over 1,000 km). Operations conducted by Ukraine confirm that such strikes are necessary for the effective conduct of conventional defence against Russia. By targeting and weakening Russian air defences, such deep-strike systems could also enhance the ability to deliver nuclear payloads. In certain scenarios, conventional retaliation might also provide an adequate response to Russia's limited use of nuclear weapons. However, to be able to launch such retaliatory attacks, Poland and other allies would need to amass large stocks of long-range missiles and strike drones. Deep-strike assets would already be in high demand for conventional warfighting, and the requirements would be even greater if NATO countries were to retaliate against additional targets such as elements of Russian critical infrastructure (refineries and power stations). Nevertheless, the very fact of European states expanding their conventional deep-strike capabilities could be perceived by Russia as a strengthening of the US's ability to launch a "disarming" attack on Russian strategic nuclear forces. An eventuality of such an operation increases the possibility that a conflict with NATO would escalate unfavourably for Russia, thereby strengthening the deterrence against Russian aggression.

The effectiveness of NATO's deterrence could also be enhanced by implementing the French "forward deterrence" initiative as a complementary measure. This, however, requires a transition from consultations to practical actions. In addition to involvement in nuclear exercises in France, they should include exercises and visits of French nuclear-capable aircraft in Poland and other countries taking part in the initiative. Such steps would more visibly signal that their territory is covered by France's nuclear deterrence, albeit within the specific constraints and caveats defined by the French nuclear doctrine. Exercises and visits would also help develop the strategic and

logistical experience required to support potential temporary deployment of these aircraft armed with nuclear weapons during a crisis. Such deployments could serve as a response to Russia's increased nuclear posturing towards countries in the region. By communicating France's readiness to use nuclear forces in response to an attack on a regional ally, they could help to reduce Russia's willingness to escalate.

Last but not least, any Russian arms control proposals regarding the reduction of its nuclear capabilities in Kaliningrad Oblast and in Belarus should be approached with great caution. Even if Russia agreed not to station nuclear warheads and/or specific delivery systems on these territories, it could rapidly redeploy them in the event of a conflict. Furthermore, European NATO member states would remain within the reach of many nuclear systems stationed in mainland Russia. Consequently, it would be disadvantageous for NATO countries to agree on non-deployment of Russian nuclear warheads in Kaliningrad Oblast and in Belarus at the cost of accepting restrictions on: the presence of US nuclear weapons in Europe, the possibility of deploying them in additional Alliance member states, extending participation in NATO's nuclear sharing programme, or cooperation with France within the framework of forward deterrence.

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