

## UNDERSTANDING RUSSIA'S NUCLEAR DOCTRINAL SHIFTS

By

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*(Views expressed in the brief are those of the author, and do not represent those of ISSI)*



The recent announcement by Russian President Vladimir Putin to amend the country's nuclear doctrine shook the arms control regime once again. According to a statement by President Putin in September 2024, Russia is considering revising its nuclear doctrine to lower the threshold for the use of nuclear weapons. Russia is expanding the range of situations that may result in the possible use of nuclear weapons, especially in the face of credible information regarding a large-scale cross-border attack featuring drones, missiles, or aircraft.<sup>1</sup> More importantly, President Putin added that any attack by a non-nuclear country, with the assistance of a nuclear weapon state, would be interpreted as a “combined attack on the Russian Federation.”<sup>2</sup> The statement has come at a time not only when the world is already grappling with heightened tensions and increased conflicts but also as the global regimes of arms control, disarmament, and non-testing are becoming increasingly fragile.

Nuclear arms, from a military perspective, were regarded by the former Soviet Union as crucial to its strategic military operations. It was believed that these weapons would provide a winning edge in a

<sup>1</sup> “Lukashenko says Russian Nuclear Shift was Overdue,” *Reuters*, October 13, 2024, <https://www.reuters.com/business/aerospace-defense/belarus-lukashenko-says-russian-nuclear-shift-was-overdue-may-prompt-west-cool-2024-10-13/>.

<sup>2</sup> Nathan Hodge, “Putin Revises his Nuclear Doctrine, but have his Red Lines Shifted?,” *CNN*, September 27, 2024, <https://edition.cnn.com/2024/09/27/world/putin-nuclear-doctrine-analysis-intl/index.html>.

conventional conflict that may result in a nuclear war.<sup>3</sup> According to a renowned Russian analyst, the central assumption of Soviet military doctrine during the first twenty-five years of the nuclear age was that in case of a conflict on the global stage triggered by the West, the Soviet Union would be victorious against its adversaries and secure victory even if significant damage was caused.<sup>4</sup>

The Russian doctrine has undergone several revisions since the Cold War days. Former General Secretary of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU) Leonid Brezhnev in the year 1982 made an official statement that the Soviet Union would refrain from initiating the use of nukes during a conflict. However, the year 1993 experienced the Russian rejection of the Soviet Union's No-first Use (NFU) commitment due to the weakened conventional forces at that time. In light of the internal and external factors resulting from the fall of the Eastern Bloc and the evolving global polarity, Russia made adjustments to its military doctrine and national security framework on numerous occasions in the past several decades. The later versions issued in the 1990s came across as placing greater reliance on nuclear arms as an instrument for deterrence.

The year 2000 saw Russia's expansion of the conditions for the use of nuclear weapons. By mid-2009, it was indicated by Nikolai Patrushev, the Secretary of the Security Council of the Russian Federation, that Russia may be prepared to carry out a "pre-emptive nuclear strike" against an adversary striking with conventional weapons in an all-out regional war.<sup>5</sup> In 2010, however, the doctrine evolved as the idea of preemptive strikes was renounced and the criteria under which nuclear arms could be employed were also narrowed. Furthermore, the position in 2014 largely remained unchanged, being similar to that of 2010. The year 2020, however, saw the officially published detailed document titled, "On Basic Principles of State Policy of the Russian Federation on Nuclear Deterrence," outlining Russia's policy of nuclear deterrence.<sup>6</sup> According to the provisions of Russia's 2020 nuclear doctrine, Russia could potentially employ ultimate weapons as a response to a nuclear or conventional attack that poses an existential threat to the Russian state.<sup>7</sup>

The revised doctrine of 2024 includes Belarus under Russia's nuclear umbrella, demonstrating a strong alliance. According to the previous doctrine, as a response to conventional attacks, nuclear

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3 Sławomir Kleszcz, "Russia's New Nuclear Doctrine: Russian Policy of Deterrence," *Przegląd Nauk o Obronności* 15 (2022): 138-160.

4 Alexey Arbatov, "Understanding the US-Russia Nuclear Schism," *Survival* 59, no. 2 (2017): 33-66.

5 David Nowak, "Russia to Allow Pre-emptive Nukes," *Associated Press*, October 14, 2009, [https://archive.boston.com/news/world/europe/articles/2009/10/14/report\\_russia\\_to\\_allow\\_pre\\_emptive\\_nukes/](https://archive.boston.com/news/world/europe/articles/2009/10/14/report_russia_to_allow_pre_emptive_nukes/).

6 Kleszcz, "Russia's New Nuclear Doctrine."

7 "Russia Flaunts its many Doomsday Weapons to keep the West from Ramping up Support for Ukraine," *AP News*, October 18, 2024, <https://apnews.com/article/russia-putin-nuclear-weapon-doctrine-missiles-bf50d3155369cc0a5f12ef7805bf2340>.

weapons could be deployed when the state faced an existential threat, stressing that nuclear deterrence maintains the security of the state's national sovereignty and territorial integrity. In contrast, the new doctrine offers a more vague explanation that nuclear weapons could be deployed against a "critical threat to our sovereignty."<sup>8</sup> Some argue that such vague wording sparks worries regarding Russia's strategy of "escalate to de-escalate," indicating a greater risk-taking intent in the Ukraine war while creating ambiguity for adversaries.<sup>9</sup> Interestingly, the current doctrine holds third-party supporter states responsible, specifically with a focus on NATO states that are backing and arming Ukraine. Similarly, under the old doctrine, the use of nuclear weapons was limited to confirmed ballistic missile attacks, whereas the revised version now also includes aerospace attacks from aircraft, missiles, and drones. These revisions, therefore, indicate that Russia intends to target NATO regarding Ukraine by signaling broader circumstances for the possible use of nuclear arms and an increased intent to escalate the ongoing conflict.<sup>10</sup>

In recent times, Russia has been actively stressing its nuclear capabilities as a reminder to the world about its possession of the world's largest nuclear arsenal. It is counting on a large number of warheads and missiles as a significant deterrent to counter NATO's conventional superiority to discourage the perceived threats to Russia's sovereignty. The recent announcement by Russia is regarded as a direct signal for nuclear confrontation as Ukraine received America's green signal to strike targets situated deep inside Russia using U.S.-made long-range missiles.<sup>11</sup> Russia previously emphasized that its warnings are serious, with President Putin adding that if the West approves Kyiv's ask to launch the American ATACMs and British Storm Shadow missiles deep into the territory of Russia, it would be the start of a confrontation between Russia and the West.<sup>12</sup>

Earlier in June 2024, in collaboration with its ally Belarus, a second phase of drills was launched to train troops in the use of tactical nuclear weapons. This effort was a part of Russia's approach to deter the West from enhancing its assistance to Ukraine.<sup>13</sup> Referring to these drills, Dmitry Peskov, the Kremlin's Spokesperson, made a statement that along with such drills the upholding of combat

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<sup>8</sup> Heather Williams, "Why Russia is Changing its Nuclear Doctrine Now?," Center for Strategic and International Studies, September 27, 2024, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/why-russia-changing-its-nuclear-doctrine-now>.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> Holly Ellyatt, "Russia says Ukraine attacked it using U.S. long-range missiles, signals it's ready for nuclear response", *CNBC*, November 19, 2024, <https://www.cnbc.com/2024/11/19/russia-says-ukraine-attacked-it-using-us-made-missiles.html>.

<sup>12</sup> Mark Trevelyan and Andrew Osborn, "Putin draws a nuclear red line for the West", *Reuters*, September 27, 2024, <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/putin-draws-nuclear-red-line-west-2024-09-27/>.

<sup>13</sup> "Russia, Belarus Launch a Second Stage of Drills to Train Troops in Tactical Nuclear Weapons," *AP News*, June 11, 2024, <https://apnews.com/article/russia-belarus-nuclear-drills-ukraine-1a601fd9de0c32158278851cc153c2ce>.

readiness is crucial keeping in view America and its allies in Europe's "hostile decisions and actions," along with their "daily provocations."<sup>14</sup> Similarly, according to the Russian Defence Ministry, these drills aimed to ensure the readiness of personnel and equipment to maintain the territorial integrity and sovereignty of the Russia-Belarus alliance.<sup>15</sup>

The leader of Belarus, Alexander Lukashenko claimed that the announcement by Russia to revise its nuclear weapons policy was long overdue and may "cool the ardour" of its Western adversaries.<sup>16</sup> He also remarked that the doctrine should have been revised much earlier. He noted that if the West had not acknowledged Putin's earlier nuclear warnings, they would have already struck Belarus and more specifically, Russia.<sup>17</sup> Hence, he remarked that the recent revision may lessen their enthusiasm.

Since the onset of the Ukraine conflict, the relations between Russia and the West have consistently deteriorated. Russia has conveyed a clear message to the West since February 2022, as President Putin unambiguously stated: "Russia will respond immediately, and the consequences will be such as you have never seen in your entire history."<sup>18</sup> However, despite the threats, the U.S. has been testing the redlines asserted by Russia. The U.S. ardently believes that the likelihood of the use of nuclear weapons remains low as long as Russia is not on the brink of a military defeat in Ukraine. It has been argued that America has adopted a careful approach to steer clear of risky situations.<sup>19</sup> Similarly, it is believed that the U.S. intends to uphold its careful approach despite the Ukrainian drone attacks on the Kremlin and Russian radar stations, elements of Russian nuclear defence.

Moreover, apart from the escalating West-Russia tensions due to the Ukraine war, recent years have also witnessed steady erosion of arms control arrangements between the U.S. and Russia. The arms control regimes established between the U.S. and the Soviet Union have unraveled over time. Agreements such as the New START, Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty (INF), Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty (ABM), Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty (CTBT), and Open Skies have been influenced by the deteriorating relations between Russia and the U.S.<sup>20</sup> More importantly, the withdrawal from and suspension of the arms control agreements have left the regime in a fragile state, creating

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> "Lukashenko says Russian Nuclear Shift was Overdue."

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> President of Russia, "Address by the President of Russia," February 24, 2022, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/67843>.

<sup>19</sup> Alexander Gabuev, "How Serious a Threat is Russia's New Nuclear Doctrine?," *Carnegie Endowment*, October 3, 2024, <https://carnegieendowment.org/russia-eurasia/politika/2024/09/russia-nuclear-doctrine-blackmail?lang=en>.

<sup>20</sup> Mathias Hammer, "The Collapse of Global Arms Control," *Time*, November 13, 2023, <https://time.com/6334258/putin-nuclear-arms-control/>.

greater uncertainty about the actions the two powers might take in the future as tensions keep rising.

The already fragile arms control regime has been further weakening along with an increasing focus on the use of nuclear weapons amidst heightening competition and insecurity among states. The continued advancement of nuclear arsenals, along with the suspension and de-ratification of key global arms control treaties, brings to attention the increasing inter-state rivalry and declining state of global security. The recent doctrinal shift by Russia strengthens the argument that once again states are increasingly relying on their nuclear arsenals. Against the backdrop of major power competition and shifting nuclear doctrines, the prospect of a new nuclear arms race, the use of nuclear weapons, and the resumption of nuclear testing has been looming over the horizon now more than ever. Thus, such developments serve as a major blow to the arms control regime and international security.