

The U.S. Should Address the Threat from Russia's Non-Strategic Nuclear Weapons

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KEY TAKEAWAYS

Russia has a significant advantage numerically over U.S. and NATO in non-strategic nuclear weapons (NSNWs) in Europe.

This imbalance in NSNWs could lead to a higher level of risk-taking on the part of Russia that seriously affects U.S. national interests.

The United States and NATO must take steps to address this asymmetry in NSNWs to mitigate Russia's advantage, which could lead to further instability in the region.

Assessing a military threat typically involves the nature of the capability and a nation's potential will to employ it. A strong military capability in benign or friendly hands is generally not worrisome.

In the case of non-strategic nuclear weapons (NSNWs)—which are generally categorized as low-yield, short-range, or theater nuclear weapons purposed for tactical or battlefield use¹—the frequent and broad-based messaging from Russian leaders regarding their potential use demands the United States take the threat seriously.

Indeed, Russia has made numerous statements referring to nuclear weapon use since beginning its war on Ukraine in February 2022. In February, Russian President Vladimir Putin put his nuclear forces on heightened alert and warned of consequences for those who might interfere in Russia's actions in Ukraine:

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I would now like to say something very important for those who may be tempted to interfere in these developments [in Ukraine] from the outside. No matter who tries to stand in our way or all the more so create threats for our country and our people, they must know that Russia will respond immediately, and the consequences will be such as you have never seen in your entire history.²

In late April, Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov also warned supporters of Ukraine, especially NATO countries, that the threat of nuclear war “should not be underestimated” in an interview with Russian state media.³

As a result, while always mindful of Russia’s strategic nuclear arsenal, policy and security experts are especially concerned about Russia using its NSNW to achieve its political-military goals in Ukraine and possibly elsewhere in the future, including against NATO.

Russia’s significant NSNW arsenal reflects another dimension of its nuclear challenge that needs to be seriously considered in the context of U.S., NATO, and Eurasian security.

Accordingly, the Biden Administration and Congress, in cooperation with NATO allies, should:

- **Bolster** NATO’s force posture to improve conventional deterrence in Europe, especially frontline NATO states;
- **Undermine** Russia’s asymmetric NSNW advantage against NATO by deploying additional NSNWs to Europe;
- **Deploy** additional theater missile defenses to offset the Russian NSNW threat; and
- **Assess** U.S. and NATO readiness to respond to a Russian nuclear attack or event.

A Significant Stockpile

While open-source numbers vary on the number of weapons, according to the Defense Intelligence Agency (DIA) in 2017, Russia is believed to have some 2,000 NSNWs in its nuclear stockpile. These NSNWs can be carried aboard an array of delivery systems across Russian ground, naval, and air forces:

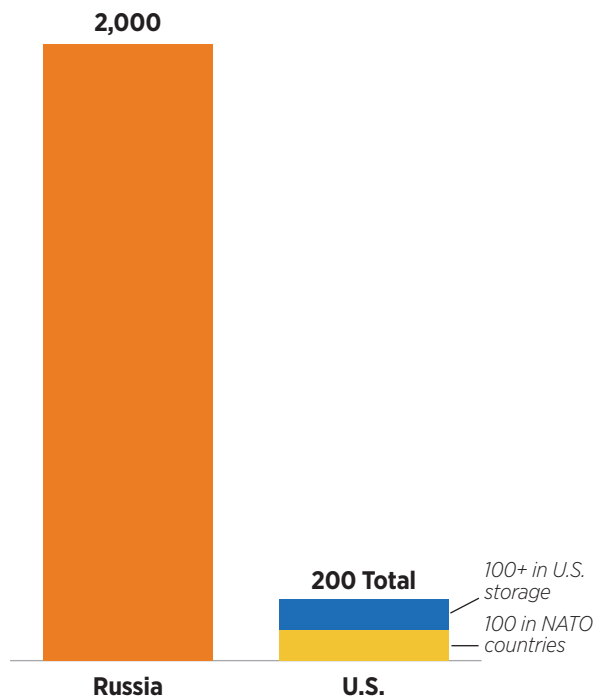
These [delivery systems] include air-to-surface missiles, short-range ballistic missiles, gravity bombs, and depth charges for medium-range bombers,

CHART 1

Russia's Non-Strategic Nuclear Arsenal Dwarfs the U.S.'s

CURRENT APPROXIMATE
WEAPONS NUMBERS

SOURCES: Defense Intelligence Agency, "Russian Military Power Report 2017," 2017, https://www.dia.mil/Portals/110/Images/News/Military_Powers_Publications/Russia_Military_Power_Report_2017.pdf (accessed June 15, 2022), and Adam Taylor and William Neff, "Why the World Is So Worried About Russia's 'Tactical' Nuclear Weapons," *The Washington Post*, March 29, 2022, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2022/03/29/why-world-is-so-worried-about-russias-tactical-nuclear-weapons/> (accessed June 15, 2022).



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tactical bombers, and naval aviation, as well as anti-ship, anti-submarine, and anti-aircraft missiles, and torpedoes for surface ships and submarines.⁴

By contrast, the United States has about 100 NSNWs in the form of aircraft-delivered B61 gravity bombs reportedly forward-deployed and stored in Belgium, Germany, Italy, the Netherlands, and Turkey.⁵ Another 100-plus nuclear gravity bombs are estimated to be in storage in the United States.⁶ While under U.S. operational command and control, if deployed in battle, these tactical nuclear weapons would be carried aboard dual-capable (i.e., able to deliver nuclear and conventional munitions) NATO F-15, F-16, and Tornado fighters and eventually the F-35 fighter.⁷

At the moment, Russia has an approximate 20:1 advantage in these weapons over NATO in Europe. Likewise, Russia has a 10:1 advantage over the United States and NATO overall.

These weapons fall under no existing arms control treaty or agreement, although there is a strong international norm to not use these weapons that has developed over the past 75-plus years, as the use of such weapons would galvanize international opinion against an aggressor.

Doctrine Dilemma

Russia's strategy to potentially employ these weapons in a crisis or a conflict is based on the notion of escalate to deescalate (ETD).⁸

While Moscow does not openly acknowledge this so-called doctrine, the 2018 U.S. Nuclear Posture Review refers to it:

Russia considers the United States and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) to be the principal threats to its contemporary geopolitical ambitions. Russian strategy and doctrine emphasize the potential coercive and military uses of nuclear weapons. It mistakenly assesses that the threat of nuclear escalation or actual first use of nuclear weapons would serve to "de-escalate" a conflict on terms favorable to Russia. These mistaken perceptions increase the prospect for dangerous miscalculation and escalation.⁹

Indeed, while Russia is well-known for its large strategic nuclear exercises, "Russia has exercised the use of low-yield nuclear weapons for this type of contingency [i.e., losing a conventional war against NATO]."¹⁰

Dmitry Medvedev, the former Russian president and current deputy chairman of the Russian Security Council, outlined Moscow's policy on the use of nuclear weapons in a recent interview:

Number one is the situation when Russia is struck by a nuclear missile. The second case is any use of other nuclear weapons against Russia or its allies. The third is an attack on a critical infrastructure that will have paralyzed our nuclear deterrent forces. And the fourth case is when an act of aggression is committed against Russia and its allies, which jeopardized the existence of the country itself, even without the use of nuclear weapons, that is, with the use of conventional weapons.¹¹

Interestingly, but not surprisingly, Medvedev did not mention the ETD option in that list of four conditions for the Russian use of strategic or NSNW. This unspoken ETD stratagem is perhaps the most likely scenario for the use of Russian nuclear weapons, especially tactical nuclear weapons, including employing them in its current campaign against Ukraine.

Possible Russian NSNW Use Scenarios

Although there is debate about the effectiveness of NSNWs on the battlefield, Putin might decide to use the ETD strategy—possibly involving

NSNWs—for advancing Russia’s goals in Europe. Indeed, the most likely scenario at the moment is in Ukraine.

For instance, Moscow could conduct an underground test of a Russian NSNW on its national territory or detonate an NSNW over the Arctic Ocean as a “warning shot” at Ukraine, signaling that an escalation in the conflict from the conventional to the nuclear is possible.

Russian forces could also detonate an NSNW over an unpopulated area of Ukraine as a demonstration of Russia’s nuclear capability and willingness to use it against Ukraine. While the direct damage might be insignificant, a nuclear air burst could create radioactive fallout that would drift with the air currents, as well as cause an electromagnetic pulse (EMP) that could have a wide-ranging, devastating effect on military and civilian electronics within the EMP’s range. The Kremlin could also strike a major Ukrainian city or Ukrainian military unit or installation with a tactical nuclear weapon to terrorize Ukraine into surrender.

Any NSNW use would also be a signal to the United States, NATO, and others who are supporting Ukraine. Indeed, Medvedev warned in May, “There is always a risk that such a conflict [Ukraine] will turn into a full-on nuclear war. This will be a disastrous scenario for everyone.”¹²

The Kremlin might calculate that Ukraine’s supporters (e.g., NATO) will not risk a wider conflict with Russia, not chancing the possibility that Russia might expand the conflict or the use of nuclear weapons beyond Ukraine. Ukraine and its backers would have to make some fateful choices.

Using the ETD nuclear stratagem, Moscow could force advantageous political and military outcomes to the war in Ukraine, including freezing the conflict in place, potentially locking in any Russian political and territorial gains, or achieving total victory over Ukraine.

The Russian use of NSNWs in Ukraine, a non-NATO state, is certainly one scenario, but equally troubling is ETD employed against NATO and its member states.

In one hypothetical scenario, Moscow attacks one or all of the Baltic states with its conventional forces in an effort to reincorporate these three former Soviet republics back into Russia. Invoking Article 5 after the attack, NATO responds with conventional forces. Concerned about the inferiority of its armed forces relative to NATO forces of 30 nations, Russia decides to employ tactical nuclear weapons in a dramatic step up the escalation ladder of conflict.

Like in the Ukraine scenario, Russia could explode the battlefield nuclear weapon or weapons against a target in the Baltics, over an unpopulated area in the Baltics, or even over a body of water far from land in order to deter

NATO from expanding the conflict with conventional forces in the Baltics or into Russia—or responding in kind against Russia with tactical or strategic nuclear weapons. Russia might wager that NATO would be deeply divided politically over its response to the Russian NSNW use and concerned about tactical—or even strategic—nuclear weapons being used against NATO military and civilian targets, including in the United States.

At a minimum, Moscow could assess that this situation puts Russia in a strong diplomatic and military negotiating position, including consolidating territorial gains in one or more of the Baltic states. There is, of course, a significant risk that the use of NSNWs would fortify NATO's resolve and further isolate Russia internationally. More broadly, what lessons would China, Iran, and North Korea learn from Russia's use of NSNWs as well as from the American and or NATO response to it, including the critical questions of responding in kind and possible escalation involving strategic nuclear weapons?

What Washington and NATO Partners Should Do

Considering there is no apparent end in sight to Russian warfare in Ukraine or belligerence against NATO, in order to endeavor to dissuade, deter, and deny Russia from using NSNWs, the Biden Administration and Congress, in cooperation with NATO allies, should do the following:

Bolster NATO's Force Posture to Improve Conventional Deterrence in Europe, Especially Frontline NATO States. This step is especially important considering recent Russian aggression in Ukraine. It means NATO providing a sustained forward presence of forces to at least the Baltic states and Poland—and perhaps beyond to other NATO states (e.g., Romania). This effort would also call for the addition of NATO armor, air, and theater missile defenses and long-range fire capabilities to dissuade, deter, or deny future Russian adventurism against NATO territory and interests. Deterring war with Russia at the conventional level is critical to preventing escalation involving Russian NSNWs or other nuclear weapons. NATO members should also increase defense spending to address the current and future Russian threat. A long-standing problem, equitable defense burden-sharing among NATO members, is a non-negotiable principle. Finland's and Sweden's application to join NATO is being considered this month.¹³ In the end, to avoid Russian misperceptions, miscalculations, and mistakes, a strong NATO—with U.S. leadership—is a must.

Undermine Russia's Asymmetric NSNW Advantage Against NATO by Deploying Additional NSNWs to Europe. The United States and NATO should consider increasing the number of forward-deployed battlefield nuclear weapons to the European theater. While potentially diplomatically challenging due to public opinion in Europe, such a move could help close a perceived nuclear deterrence gap with Russia and provide political reassurance to non-nuclear NATO allies, especially frontline states. The United States should also continue pursuing the Sea-Launched Cruise Missile-Nuclear program as initially proposed by the *2018 Nuclear Posture Review* to improve U.S. capacity and capability against NSNWs.¹⁴ These moves would provide additional response options for U.S. and NATO policymakers and possibly facilitate future arms control on NSNWs with Russia. Moreover, these steps would send a firm signal to Moscow about NSNWs and its undeclared ETD strategy. Lastly, these initiatives on U.S. and NATO NSNWs would signal to Moscow that a U.S. or NATO strategic nuclear response to a NSNW attack is credible, thus fortifying NATO's defense and deterrent posture. NATO allies should fully share the cost of these efforts. U.S. outlays for new initiatives could, in part, be paid for using reforms, efficiencies, cancellations, and offsets as outlined in The Heritage Foundation's defense budget blueprint.¹⁵

Deploy Additional NATO Theater Missile Defenses to Offset the Russian NSNW Threat. This step would move to counter the Russian missile-based NSNW threat. The Ukrainian conflict has shed light on the importance of air and missile defenses in modern conflict and revealed that some NATO members are relying on Soviet-era air defense systems. These systems should be replaced with modern Western defense systems to improve interoperability, system maintenance and weapons supply, and air and missile defense integration. In this case as well, NATO allies should fully share the cost, and U.S. outlays for new weapons production and deployment initiatives could, in part, be paid for using actions referred to above.¹⁶

Assess U.S. and NATO Readiness to Respond to a Russian Nuclear Attack or Event. As soon as possible, Congress should hold open- and closed-door hearings as necessary on the readiness of U.S. and NATO forces to respond to NSNW use in Ukraine and against NATO. U.S. and NATO forces should be ready and able to operate and prevail on battlefields contaminated with radiation.¹⁷ These hearings should probe into issues such as the readiness and policies of U.S. and NATO forces to deliver NSNWs as well as respond to and defend against a nuclear attack in Europe.

Conclusion

It is clear that NSNWs could provide Russia with significant political-military advantages:

- **Moscow has a significant asymmetric advantage in NSNWs over NATO—approximately 20:1.** This asymmetry increases Moscow's policy options in its war on Ukraine and in its rivalrous and adversarial views toward the United States and NATO.
- **The Russian quantitative and qualitative advantage in NSNWs could increase absent a NATO diplomatic and military response,** considering Russia's ongoing nuclear modernization and expansion, including the development and deployment of novel weapons and hypersonic weapons.
- **The availability of NSNWs to the Russian armed forces could make up for potential Russian conventional force inferiority in a conflict with NATO.** The result could be increased risk-taking on the part of Moscow in advancing its perceived national interests in the region.

The United States and NATO should address this asymmetry in NSNWs before Russia takes advantage of it, including in Ukraine or against NATO, especially in frontline states such as the Baltics.

Whether in Ukraine, the Baltics, or another scenario involving Russian adventurism, the likelihood of the Russian use of NSNWs is arguably low, but the risk is not zero, meaning that now is the time to address this issue. Security and stability in Europe and U.S. national interests are at stake.

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Endnotes

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