



Russian Nuclear Threats:

A Security Conundrum and
the EU's Response

Abstract:

For the first time since the end of the Cold War, nuclear weapons are back at the forefront of the European security agenda. Since the early days of the invasion, Russian President Vladimir Putin has been issuing nuclear threats in response to the Western military and political support to Ukraine. The crucial security question for the EU is thus how it should respond to the Russian threats. Addressing this dilemma, this policy paper, first, discusses the nuclear dimension of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. Second, it analyses the impact of the war on the nuclear security and arms control architecture in Europe. Third, it proceeds with four policy recommendations for both a short- and long-term response.



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Introduction

On 24 February, the first day of the Russian invasion of Ukraine, and on 27 February, the Russian President Vladimir Putin issued nuclear threats to deter possible external military intervention. As a result, the ongoing war is being fought under a nuclear shadow, again making nuclear weapons a central issue in European security. Evidently, EU Member States and their partners (especially other NATO allies such as the US and the UK) need to respond appropriately to Russian nuclear threats.

The paper first discusses the nuclear dimension of the ongoing war between Russia and Ukraine. It will become clear that, at present, because of a lack of transparency and clarity, it is difficult to adequately interpret Russian nuclear signalling. This situation creates the danger of unwanted escalation through miscalculation, miscommunication, and accidents. For this reason, the approach recommended in this policy paper is one of prudence and responsibility.

Subsequently, the paper will briefly analyse the effects on Europe's nuclear security and arms control architecture. These early observations and interpretations of the nuclear dimension and the potential impact of the war are key to understanding the nature of the nuclear threat that the EU Member States are dealing with, and how to respond to them appropriately.

The third section provides an answer to the paper's central question: how should EU Member States respond to the Russian nuclear threats? Four policy recommendations emerge from the analysis and the author's assessment.¹

The nuclear dimension of the ongoing war between Russia and Ukraine

On 24 February, Russia invaded Ukraine and the ensuing war, now in its 'second phase', is unfortunately far from over by the time of this writing (*Hunder, 2022*). Heavy fighting continues in eastern and Southern Ukraine. Nevertheless, this section will focus primarily on important developments regarding the nuclear dimension during the first weeks of the war, due to the fact that Putin issued his nuclear threats at that time.

On 3 January, Russia, the US, the UK, France, and China released the '*Joint Statement of the Leaders of the Five Nuclear-Weapon States on Preventing Nuclear War and Avoiding Arms Races*'. The statement declared that 'a nuclear war cannot be won and must never be fought' (*The White House, 2022*). During the build-up of Russian troops on the Ukrainian border, this seemed like a reassuring signal by the five nuclear-weapon states (especially Russia) (*Notte and Bidgood, 2022*). However, in light of the nuclear threats issued by Putin on 24 and 27 February, Russia's credibility regarding this statement can be questioned. Subsequently, in January, there was a series of diplomatic negotiations between Russia and the

¹ I draw from a series of discussions with experts under the Chatham House Rule.

West on the two Russian security proposals that included prospects for an arms agreement on intermediate-range and shorter-range missiles (*The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, 2021b*).

A week before the start of the war, the Russian Strategic Forces conducted a planned nuclear exercise, 'as a reminder, and warning, of its nuclear capabilities' (*Woolf, 2022*). Consequently, on the first day of the war, Putin declared in a speech: 'I would now like to say something very important for those who may be tempted to interfere in these developments from the outside [...] they must know that Russia will respond immediately, and the consequences will be such as you have never seen in your entire history' (*Bloomberg News, 2022*). This implicit nuclear threat was clearly meant to deter a Western military intervention (*Woolf, 2022*). Then on 26 February, Deputy Chairman of the Russian Security Council Dmitry Medvedev warned that Russia should take drastic diplomatic steps in reaction to Western sanctions and support for Ukraine, such as leaving New START (Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty) (*Gottemoeller, 2022*).

The nuclear threat thus remained implicit in the speech of 24 February, the day that the Russian invasion started. In contrast, as a reaction to the economic sanctions imposed by the West, on 27 February Putin ordered a 'special mode of combat duty in the strategic deterrence forces' to dissuade external military intervention and signal Russia's resolve to accomplish its objectives (*Holloway, 2022*). This 'mode' was unknown before, so Russian Defence Minister Sergei Shoigu clarified later that this order meant an increase in the staffing levels of Russia's nuclear strategic force command centres (*Oliker, 2022*). As a result, the survivability and readiness of the forces increased (*Williams, 2022*). However, the Pentagon stated on 28 February that 'it had not seen any changes in Russia's nuclear forces as a result of the increase in their alert level' (*Woolf, 2022*). Consequently, this expression was probably deliberately vague, an attempt to create nuclear ambiguity for deterrence purposes.

On that same day, 27 February, Belarus amended its constitution via a disputed referendum (*Williams and Ljunggren, 2022*). The country changed its nuclear status by allowing Russian nuclear weapons to be permanently stationed on its territory (*Woolf, 2022*). Subsequently, on 25 June, Putin offered Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko nuclear-capable Iskander missile systems and said that Belarusian Su-25 close-support aircraft could be updated to carry out nuclear missions. The reason for this offer was 'to counter an "aggressive" West' (*Reuters, 2022*). In addition to these developments, Russia and the US also adjourned their strategic stability talks on 27 February (*Foley, 2022*).

In contrast to Russian rhetoric and actions, the Pentagon decided on 2 March to postpone a planned Minuteman III missile test. According to Kimball (2022), the US wants 'to avoid the possibility that Putin might use it as a pretext for further nuclear escalation'. This test was finally cancelled on 1 April (*Steward and Ali, 2022*).

Nonetheless, there are also concerning developments regarding nuclear safety. For instance, Russia occupied the (inactive) Chernobyl nuclear power plant from 24 February until the end of March. During the occupation, the workers were functioning under stress and fatigue because it was impossible to have normal shift rotations (*Potter, 2022*). Then, the active nuclear power plant in Zaporizhzhia was hit on 4 March by a Russian missile attack (*Lewis, 2022*). Conquering and attacking these nuclear sites is obviously risky from an environmental and health perspective. There were also unconfirmed reports that Russian troops dug trenches in the Red Forest, one of the most contaminated parts of the Chernobyl Exclusion Zone. As a result, some soldiers apparently suffered radiation illness (*D'Agostino, 2022*).

Russia also spread disinformation regarding weapons of mass destruction. For example, the Russian government falsely claimed that Ukraine wanted to make 'dirty bombs' and circulated lies regarding biological laboratories (*Leitenberg, 2022*). On 11 March, the UN Security Council discussed the Russian claims of a US-supported military biological programme. The UN Undersecretary-General and High Representative for Disarmament Affairs Izumi Nakamitsu said on this issue that 'The United Nations is not aware of any biological weapons programs' (*Quinn, 2022*).

Russia claimed that it used Kinzhal missiles to strike a weapons storage facility in Western Ukraine on 19 March and a fuel depot close to Mykolaiv on 20 March (*Woolf, 2022*). The use of Kinzhal is important because it has dual capability – it can carry a conventional or nuclear warhead (*Woolf, 2022*). According to Ven *Bruusgaard (2022)*, the increased use of dual-capable systems could signal 'a warning to the adversary of a move toward the nuclear threshold'.

France, the only remaining EU Member State with nuclear weapons after Brexit, changed in March the deployment schedule of its sea-based deterrence force from one nuclear-armed ballistic missile submarine (SSBN) at sea to three (of the four available) submarines. This change was intended to make the sea-based deterrence force more capable of surviving a strike on Île Longue, the home port of the French SSBNs (*Tanguy, 2022*). Besides this, France tested its new air-launched strategic missile ASMPA on 23 March (*Ministère des Armées, 2022*).

Later in the war, Russia again issued nuclear threats when Finland and Sweden were considering joining NATO. Putin stated on 14 April that if the two states become NATO allies, Russia would deploy hypersonic missiles and nuclear weapons to Kaliningrad. Russian nuclear coercion is clearly not restricted to Ukraine (*Faulconbridge, 2022*). Russia also conducted a successful test of its new Sarmat intercontinental ballistic missile (ICBM) on 20 April, and when Putin congratulated the Russian Ministry of Defence he said that the test 'will be a wakeup call for those who are trying to threaten our country in the frenzy of rabid, aggressive rhetoric' (*The Kremlin, 2022*). This was another example of nuclear signalling to deter potential intervention in the war.

Experts disagree on whether Putin is likely to order a Russian nuclear strike and why he would do so. *Woolf (2022)* concluded that most analysts 'argued that President Putin was seeking to bully or coerce the United States and NATO so

that they would limit their support for Ukraine and cease their interventions in the conflict'. In other words, most experts saw the Russian nuclear signalling as an implicit nuclear threat and few of them believed it was 'an explicit threat to employ nuclear weapons in attacks against Ukraine' (*Woolf, 2022*). In short, it is at present difficult to correctly interpret the recent nuclear signalling. Moreover, this lack of clarity and transparency also creates the danger of unwanted escalation through miscalculation, miscommunication, and accidents. As a result of this difficult situation, this paper favours a more prudent and responsible approach. EU states should remain cautious and be careful of policy moves that could be seen as escalatory. One of the paper's policy recommendations, therefore, calls for a 'strategy of responsive restraint'.

The nuclear security and arms control architecture in Europe

This section briefly analyses the effect of Russia's rhetoric and actions on the nuclear security and arms control architecture in Europe. Global and regional arms control and non-proliferation architectures were already eroding before this war. In 2015, the review conference of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) failed to agree on a final document (*Notte and Bidgood, 2022*). Then, in 2019, the US withdrew from the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty because of Russian treaty violations. This 1987 treaty between the US and the USSR was particularly important for Europe because the types of missiles it forbade were meant for use in the European theatre (*Deveraux, 2022*).

If Russia leaves the New START nuclear arms control agreement, as Medvedev suggested it might, there would be no bilateral treaty left between the US and Russia. Kimball argued that without 'nuclear arms control guardrails, the risk of [a] costly, unconstrained global nuclear arms race will grow' (*Kimball, 2022*). On 27 March, Russia and the US also adjourned the bilateral strategic stability talks. Consequently, a breakdown of Russian-US bilateral arms control is not only 'a significant loss for both countries', (*Maurer, 2022*) but also for Europe and the rest of the world.

Gottemoeller, former Deputy Secretary-General of NATO, expects the next NPT review conference in August this year to have a negative outcome (*Gottemoeller, 2022*), just like in 2015. Similarly, Meier (2022), said that 'the conflict will likely increase the salience of nuclear weapons [...] Attributing responsibility for the greater role of nuclear weapons will be contentious, creating a major obstacle for a successful review conference'. Moreover, former UN assistant secretary-general Ramesh Thakur argued that 'Russia's aggression [...] could also revive interest in proliferation among some countries' (*Thakur, 2022*). In other words, there is an increased risk of horizontal proliferation, which includes 'the acquisition of nuclear weapons, or the fissile materials and the technology to make them, by nation states or by non-state groups or individuals that did not previously have them' (*Sidel, 2007*).

The ongoing war and the Russian nuclear threats will probably also have an impact on vertical proliferation, 'which includes the ways in which a nation state that possesses nuclear weapons expands or improves its arsenal by increasing the number, type or reliability of its nuclear warheads or the number, types, reliability or range of the missiles, submarines or planes designed to deliver nuclear weapons' (Sidel, 2007). Even before the war, certain nuclear-armed states had decided to modernize and expand their nuclear arsenals. First, Russia is modernizing its nuclear delivery systems (Woolf, 2022). Second, despite the size of its nuclear arsenal falling to 225 since the end of the Cold War, the UK decided in 2021 in the Integrated Review that 'in recognition of the evolving security environment [...] the UK will move to an overall nuclear weapon stockpile of no more than 260 warheads' (HM Government, 2021). Third, in 2021, commercial satellite imagery revealed that China was building 'hundreds of new missile silos' (Kristensen and Korda, 2021). These new Chinese silos 'could potentially double the size of its arsenal of intercontinental ballistic missiles' (Das, 2021).

One of the main questions in this regard is whether this changed security environment will lead to a new nuclear arms race in Europe. Some EU countries are already augmenting their defence budgets and are procuring new conventional weapon systems, but it is still unclear how this will impact on the nuclear balance.

The constitutional changes in Belarus mentioned above are important because Russian nuclear weapons can now be permanently stationed in Belarus (Lewis, 2022). Alberque (2022) stated that these constitutional changes 'have enormous implications for European security in the context of the current crisis around Ukraine'.

Apart from the environmental and health risks, Russia's attacks on nuclear power plants are, according to Potter (2022), 'a direct assault on the international norms regarding nuclear violence that have developed since the advent of the nuclear age'. Obviously, the erosion of these norms is a worrying development.

Regarding Russian lies about biological laboratories in Ukraine, Leitenberg (2022) noted that 'false allegations undermine the authority and legitimacy of international treaties such as the Biological Weapons Convention'. Similarly, the false claims about 'dirty bombs' demonstrate 'the same destructive disregard for the [NPT]' (Leitenberg, 2022). Meier (2022) predicted that 'these lies will undermine the norms against weapons of mass destruction for years to come and place Russia outside the nonproliferation mainstream'. As a result, Russia is damaging existing treaties on weapons of mass destruction with their disinformation campaigns.

How should EU Member States respond to these nuclear threats?

This section aims to answer the central question of the article: how should EU Member States respond to the nuclear threats discussed above? A major caveat here is that this paper interprets the ongoing war without knowing its outcome. Therefore, the first two policy recommendations must be read as an initial answer to the evolving situation, while the last two policy recommendations are responses for the long term, meant to remain relevant regardless of the final outcome of the war. Because of the difficulty discussed above in interpreting the Russian nuclear signalling correctly, this policy paper favours a more prudent and responsible approach.

Since direct military intervention could potentially lead to further conventional and perhaps nuclear escalation, in the short term, EU Member states should be cautious and pursue a strategy of responsive restraint.

EU Member States should remain united and strongly condemn Putin's irresponsible nuclear sabre-rattling. At the same time, the European countries and their partners, particularly the US, should be aware of the dangerous potential for escalation. It is impossible to predict what the Russian response would be to direct military involvement of the West, with a 'no-fly zone' (Pietrucha and Benitez, 2022) or 'boots on the ground', for example. However, not all experts agree with this more cautious approach. Alberque and Hoffmann (2022), for

instance, argue that 'leaders must state that nuclear use would risk a military response by NATO [...] NATO would not need boots on the ground to conduct such an attack; massed conventional cruise missile strikes fired from aircraft above NATO territory and the surrounding seas could do the job'. Nevertheless, Russia's nuclear deterrence policy 'envisages the use of atomic weapons in response to what could be a conventional strike targeting the nation's critical government and military infrastructure' (Deveraux, 2022). A massive conventional missile strike by NATO as a reaction to Russian nuclear use in Ukraine could thus potentially lead to Russian nuclear strikes on NATO territory. As a result, EU countries should pursue a strategy of responsive restraint. This in turn calls for caution in considering such a dangerous situation. Accordingly, direct military intervention appears to be too risky because this could potentially lead to a regional (European) war and even a nuclear war. The responsive part of the strategy suggests a conditional approach to the use of political responses, economic sanctions, and indirect military

assistance that is based on the evolving situation on the ground. Consequently, EU countries and partners should only continue to help Ukraine indirectly with political and economic support, humanitarian aid, and indirect military assistance such as equipment deliveries, training, and intelligence sharing. It could also be argued that by not intervening directly in the war, EU states and partners avoid giving Russia a pretext to use nuclear weapons.

EU Member States and their partners should prepare in advance possible responses to further nuclear escalation by Russia.

The second policy recommendation is connected to the first one. It suggests that EU countries should prepare in advance possible responses to further nuclear escalation by Russia. Holloway (2022) states that European leaders should together with other global leaders dissuade a Russian nuclear strike through 'a massive political response' if Putin crosses the nuclear threshold, 'not so much by the threat of retaliation in kind, since that could lead to dangerous escalation'.

However, there are any number of steps that Russia could take regarding further nuclear escalation. Experts are not paying sufficient attention to options other than a nuclear strike. Instead of focusing on the most extreme case of a direct nuclear strike, we should consider alternative scenarios more seriously. First of all, Russia could increase the alert level of its strategic deterrence forces again. This would build upon the 'special mode of combat duty' order issued on 27 February. Second, Russia could make greater use of their non-nuclear deterrent forces (dual-capable systems), such as Kinzhal (*Ven Bruusgaard, 2022*). Third, Russia could conduct a nuclear exercise close to Ukraine or a NATO country. Fourth, Russia could start moving 'low-yield' nuclear warheads out of storage and stationing them closer to the front (*Podvig, 2022*). This step would be a strong signal because it cannot be done in secret because of the satellite surveillance capabilities of the US and other Western states (*Lewis, 2022*). Fifth, Russia could station nuclear weapons in Belarus, Kazakhstan, Syria, or even the occupied territories of Ukraine. Sixth, Russia could conduct a nuclear demonstration or test, thereby de facto withdrawing from the Comprehensive Nuclear Test Ban Treaty (*Adamsky, 2022*). Seventh, Russia could carry out a nuclear strike on an uninhabited location (*Alberque and Hoffmann, 2022*). Finally, Russia could conduct a nuclear strike on the battlefield in Ukraine or against a NATO country. A strong, united response from the European countries to each of these scenarios should be prepared in advance and used to dissuade Russia from further nuclear escalation. Consequently, EU states should together with their partners (especially the other NATO allies) exchange information and intelligence, plan for various scenarios, and develop possible political, economic, and military responses beforehand to react fast in the event of further nuclear escalation.

EU Member States should start working today on the future after the war, especially concerning the role of arms-control, confidence-building, and risk-reducing measures.

As discussed above, Russia's rhetoric and actions will have negative effects on the nuclear security and arms control architecture in Europe. In this regard, Meier (2022) concludes that 'the war will have serious, long-lasting effects on how the world views nuclear weapons, how it seeks to control them, and how Europe develops a new security structure'. Evidently, the final impact on the nuclear security and arms control architecture depends on how the war will play out. Nevertheless, we can already see worrying developments. Meier argues that 'finding ways to prevent nuclear war will have to be

the backbone of any future nuclear arms control agenda again'. Concerning this issue, the new Strategic Compass states that 'the EU remains committed to preserve the disarmament, non-proliferation and arms control architecture. A coordinated approach with partners is also essential in this regard' (*Council of the European Union, 2022*). Therefore, EU countries and their partners should remain open to possible new arms control initiatives, confidence-building, and risk-reducing measures as part of a sustainable solution to the current crisis. Both the EU and NATO have a crucial role to play here.

In light of the ongoing war, European states and organisations like NATO and the EU should re-evaluate the place of nuclear weapons and nuclear deterrence in their policy documents and strategies. NATO, as a nuclear alliance, is paying attention to the changing nature of the security environment. The various summit declarations since 2014 (the start of the conflict in Eastern Ukraine and the annexation of Crimea) (*NATO, 2014*) are changing in tone (*Mattelaer, 2022*). This month, the new Strategic Concept was adopted at the NATO Summit in Madrid (*NATO, 2022*). This concept formulates a response to the changed security environment since the previous concept of 2010. As a result, we see a renewed focus on the importance of nuclear deterrence alongside a substantial strengthening of conventional deterrence. Besides the new Strategic Concept, it also appears necessary to update the 2012 NATO Deterrence and Defence Posture Review (DDPR).

EU Member States should also start thinking about the role of nuclear weapons and nuclear deterrence in Europe in the twenty-first century.

In contrast, the EU's new Strategic Compass (adopted on 21 March) only talks about arms control and disarmament issues (*Council of the European Union, 2022*). The EU completely ignores the role of nuclear deterrence. This is probably due to the fact that the EU Member States have greatly diverging opinions on this matter, from the nuclear-armed France to other NATO allies that are part of the Nuclear Planning Group (*NATO, 2020*), to neutral countries like Austria and Ireland that have signed and ratified the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons (*UNODA, 2021*). Nevertheless, at the least, some EU countries should start thinking informally about ideas such as the European dialogue on nuclear deterrence proposed by Tertrais (2019), wherein 'interested European countries could embark on a dialogue on nuclear deterrence issues, which could include common visits to nuclear bases and attendance at exercises'. Regardless of the outcome of the war, it is clear that the nuclear weapons question for Europe will become very important in the coming years and should not be ignored. It is in the interest of the EU Member States, together with non-EU countries (especially the UK as the other nuclear-weapon state in Europe), to tackle this existential question among themselves. As a result, the EU would be better prepared to take a common stance vis-à-vis other international players.

Conclusion

This policy paper has discussed the nuclear dimension of the ongoing war between Russia and Ukraine. The first part provided an overview of recent events and concluded that at present, it is difficult to accurately interpret the nuclear signalling by Russia. This lack of clarity and transparency creates the danger of unwanted escalation through miscalculation, miscommunication, and accidents. For this reason, the policy recommendations presented in this paper favour a cautious and responsible approach. In the second part of the paper, the effect of Russia's nuclear threats, rhetoric, and actions on the nuclear security and arms control architecture in Europe have been briefly analysed. This revealed potential negative effects on the nuclear security and arms control architecture in Europe, as well as in the rest of the world. Following the discussion and analysis, the third part formulated a range of possible responses to the central question of this policy paper, 'How should EU countries respond to these nuclear threats?'. The following policy recommendations were provided:

- EU Member States should, in the short term, be cautious and pursue a strategy of responsive restraint, as direct military intervention could potentially lead to further conventional and perhaps nuclear escalation.
- EU Member States and their partners should prepare in advance possible responses to further nuclear escalation by Russia.
- EU Member States should start working today on the future after the war, especially concerning the role of arms-control, confidence-building and risk-reducing measures.
- EU Member States should also start thinking about the role of nuclear weapons and nuclear deterrence in Europe in the twenty-first century. ■

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