

The Return of Battlefield Nuclear Weapons

By

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The United States' and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization's (NATO) continued support for Ukraine's valiant fight to repel a Russian invasion may, ultimately, depending on the state of the conflict, lead Russia to employ one or a small number of low-yield tactical nuclear weapons against Ukraine. A conflict between the United States and China over Taiwan could also lead to a similar use of nuclear weapons. There is ample evidence to suggest a growing relevance of what are interchangeably called [non-strategic, tactical, or low-yield battlefield nuclear weapons](#).

Russia, which fields an arsenal of at least 2,000 such nuclear weapons, began modernizing its arsenal of intra-theater nuclear missiles more than a decade ago. These weapons can rapidly strike European North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) member-states—primarily with lower yield warheads.

Russia's "[escalate to deescalate](#)" strategy relies on the use of—what we call—low-yield battlefield nuclear weapons to either defeat Ukraine and force NATO capitulation in that conflict or [win a possible war against a conventional NATO](#) force advancing East to defend a NATO member-state. In short, Russia would seek a *fait accompli* using one or a small number of low-yield nuclear weapons in a limited capacity on the battlefield, for which NATO has no equal response.

What makes such an approach highly attractive to Russia is that NATO is unlikely to respond to a nuclear use in Ukraine and in an attack on NATO's eastern flank, because NATO's dual-cable aircraft capability—fighter jets armed with B-61 nuclear gravity bombs—is [not a combat-ready force](#) that can effectively counter Russian nuclear use on a battlefield. Let me reiterate, Russia likely [maintains 3,000–6,000 intra-theater nuclear weapons](#) that vary from low to high yield and short to intermediate range. Low estimates suggest they have 2,000 such weapons.

A 2017 [Defense Intelligence Agency report](#) went deeper in Russia's tactical nuclear warfare commitment revealing delivery systems that include air-to-surface missiles, short-range ballistic missiles, gravity bombs, and depth charges for medium-range bombers, tactical bombers, and naval aviation, as well as anti-ship, anti-submarine, and anti-aircraft missiles and torpedoes for surface ships and submarines. While it is only speculation, it is reasonable to suggest that Russian President Vladimir Putin was building a nuclear capability for a circumstance like he finds himself in now.

As two and a half years of war in Ukraine illustrate, Russia does not maintain a [conventional force](#) sufficient to defeat an American-led NATO force. This leaves Putin more reliant on his nuclear forces.

Given Russia's [economic and strategic limitations](#), it should come as no surprise that Russia has pursued low-yield battlefield nuclear weapons as an asymmetric advantage against the United States. In many respects, Russia is pursuing a course of action not dissimilar from the [New Look Policy](#) of the Eisenhower administration.

For the Biden administration and, soon, either Kamala Harris or Donald Trump, the real threat of nuclear weapons use in Ukraine or NATO cannot be ignored. Contrary to the mantra that [all nuclear weapons are strategic](#) and there is [no such thing as a winnable nuclear war](#), the Russians and Chinese see things differently.

Low-yield battlefield nuclear weapons do not create a nuclear wasteland. In fact, an air burst at the appropriate altitude produces no fall-out at all—only heat, a blast wave, and immediate radiation that dissipate in hundreds or a few thousand yards.

With numerous low-yield nuclear options available to Russia, there is a very real need for the United States military to retrain for operating in a post–nuclear detonation environment. In a recent public discussion, the heads of the Central Intelligence Agency and MI6 [revealed](#) that Putin came very close to using a nuclear weapon in Ukraine during the fall of 2022. Such a scenario can easily arise again.

Mirror imaging Russian perspectives on nuclear use to suggest they think like Americans and would therefore never violate the “nuclear taboo” is a recipe for getting caught unprepared. While Russians do see nuclear weapons as different than conventional weapons, they do understand weapons effects and are not given to the hyperbole that is widespread in the United States.

The fact that American integrated deterrence was a disastrous failure in its attempt to forestall a Russian invasion of Ukraine and is failing to restore deterrence with Russia vis-à-vis Ukraine means that the Russians now understand that American sanctions and other threats are largely harmless. Since the implementation of sanctions following Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, Putin found alternative outlets for Russia exports (petroleum) and found alternate sources of imports—including military supplies.

Rather than breaking Russia, American action drove China, Iran, North Korea, and Iran together. This leaves Putin less reluctant to use nuclear weapons in Ukraine than he perhaps was before.

Of course, neither China nor Russia is seeking to start a nuclear conflict that sees the exchange of strategic nuclear weapons. That would be devastating for everyone. But the use of a small number of low-yield battlefield nuclear weapons is a different story.

Even a reluctant Biden administration, now that it is coming to an end, tossed the disarmament community’s ostrich strategy into the dustheap of history. It is now a matter of whether the United States has the will to embark on the expansive modernization effort required to fill the gap in battlefield nuclear weapons between the United States (fewer than 200) and its adversaries (2,000 plus).

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