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What Potential Threat Do the Russian Armed Forces Represent?

Maren Garberg Bredesen and Karsten Friis

In 2019, Russia's Chief of the General Staff, Valery Gerasimov, presented a 'strategy of active defence', a possible prelude to the forthcoming Russian military doctrine. This article examines this strategy with particular emphasis on the role of precision-guided missiles, tactical nuclear weapons and the role of the navy. It provides insights on the shape of new Russian military doctrine and the military threat Russia might represent to the West. Maren Garberg Bredesen and Karsten Friis conclude that the active defence concept may imply a lowering of the use-of-force threshold. Russia's continued build-up of tactical nuclear weapons integrated into the conventional forces reinforces this concern.

In August 2019, Russia commenced *Ocean Shield*, its largest naval exercise since the Cold War.¹ Around 49 warships and 20 supply ships from the Northern and Baltic Fleets participated, as well as 58 aircraft. In total, about 10,000 personnel were involved. The exercise took place primarily in the Baltic Sea and along the Norwegian coast north to the Arctic. The purpose, it seems, was to exercise a sea denial – that is, prevent NATO from entering the Baltic Sea and the waters north of Iceland.² This concept is often described as the 'bastion' defence, its objective being to prevent NATO operating in the sea and air northeast of the Greenland–Iceland–UK (GIUK) gap, thereby protecting Russia's ballistic nuclear-missile-armed submarines in the Kola peninsula.

Following the exercise, in October 2019, between eight and 10 Russian Northern Fleet submarines – the first of the new *Yasen*-class multi-purpose submarines and an *Akula*-class attack submarine – sailed into the Norwegian Sea, marking Russia's biggest submarine operation since the Cold War.³ Two of these vessels, having travelled deep into the North Atlantic, and probably reaching the US east coast, took until January 2020 to return to the Kola peninsula, making it the longest-lasting Russian submarine operation in history.⁴

On 2 March 2019, Russia's Chief of the General Staff, Valery Gerasimov, gave a speech at the Russian Academy of Military Science, where he presented what he called a 'strategy of active defence'.⁵ While the strategy appeared to be new

1. *TASS*, 'Ocean Shield Exercise Lasted One Week Longer Than Expected', 1 August 2019; Thomas Nilsen, 'Russian Navy to Hold Live-Fire Exercise off Northern Norway', *Barents Observer*, 6 August 2019; Lars Hallingstorp, 'Bekymret over russisk storøvelse' ['Concerned About Major Russian Exercise'], *Forsvaret*, 14 August 2019, <<https://forsvaret.no/aktuelt/russisk-stor%C3%B8velse>>, accessed 15 March 2020.
2. Norwegian Intelligence Service, 'Focus 2020: The Norwegian Intelligence Service's Assessment of Current Security Challenges', p. 41, <https://forsvaret.no/presse_/ForsvaretDocuments/Focus2020-web.pdf>, accessed 1 August 2020.
3. Thomas Nilsen, 'Russian Subs Honing Stealth Skills in Major North Atlantic Drill, Says Norwegian Intel', *Barents Observer*, 29 October 2019.
4. Lieutenant General Morten Haga Lunde, speech given at Oslo Military Society, 10 February 2020.
5. Valery Gerasimov, speech given at the Annual Meeting of the Academy of Military Science, Moscow, 2 March 2019, <<http://redstar.ru/vektory-razvitiya-voennoj-strategii/>>, accessed 30 August 2020. For English translation, see <<https://>>



The Russian submarine *Severodvinsk*, 2018. Russia has invested heavily in the conventional and nuclear capabilities of its navy. *Courtesy of mil.ru/Wikimedia/CC BY 4.0*

in its conceptualisation, arguably it summarises the modernisation of the Russian armed forces since 2008 and Russian security thinking since 2014. Importantly, it points towards what the next Russian military doctrine, expected within about a year, may bring.

This article examines Gerasimov's active defence strategy in the context of the Russian military's evolution over the past decade, with particular emphasis on the role of precision-guided missiles, tactical nuclear weapons and the role of the navy. It asks what should be expected of a new Russian military doctrine and what military danger Russia might represent. While recognising that strategic nuclear weapons and deterrence continue to be the cornerstones of Russian security, as they have been since Soviet times, these are not the focus of this article.⁶

This article puts the case that Russia is likely to continue using military force as a foreign and security policy tool, not only to defend its territory and interests, but also to support the country's great power ambitions abroad.⁷ As a consequence, the main potential military threat facing Europe today is the lowering of the use-of-force threshold implied by the active defence concept. In addition, Russia's continued build-up of tactical nuclear weapons integrated into its conventional forces reinforces this concern.

Russia's Worldview and Objectives

Julia Gurganus and Eugene Rumer identify three priorities as central to Russia's view of the world and its behaviours that apply not only during President

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- www.memri.org/reports/russian-first-deputy-defense-minister-gerasimov-our-response-based-active-defense-strategy.
6. Kristin Ven Bruusgaard, 'Russian Strategic Deterrence', *Survival* (Vol. 58, No. 4, 2016), pp. 7–26. The Russian army is not discussed here, both due to space limitations and because the Russian land component has limited capacity for protracted offensive warfighting. Although in theory it could quickly capture, for example, the Baltic states, it would struggle to maintain an occupational force for an extended period, as this would act as a drain on personnel, logistics and other resources required on other flanks. This does not rule out tactical territorial advances in the event of conflict with NATO, but land forces are unlikely to be the main Russian service in a war. See Pavel K Baev, 'PART II: The Re-Emerging Nuclear Dimension in Russian-European Relations', *Georgetown Journal of International Affairs*, 7 May 2019.
 7. Bettina Renz, *Russia's Military Revival* (Cambridge: Polity, 2018).

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Vladimir Putin's rule, but for decades – if not centuries – before it.⁸ First among these is a quest for strategic depth, which involves securing buffers against threats and thus preserving Russian unity and sovereignty. The main fear of the Kremlin and its underpinning social structure is that someone – internal or external – may undermine or destabilise this system, with Western encroachment being a primary concern.⁹ According to Dara Massicot, Russian threat perceptions have hardened considerably since 2014:

Russian leaders believe that certain negative trends – the use of economic sanctions, “color revolutions,” and the potential for interstate conflict – are accelerating. They assess that the current U.S.-led world order is coming to an end while rising powers like China, Russia, and others challenge the existing order. Senior officials assume Washington and its allies are attempting to contain or intimidate Russia.¹⁰

Second is an ambition to be recognised as a great power. Putin seems driven by a notion of power parity and is determined to actively undermine US global hegemony while simultaneously advancing Russia's position and interests. As he stated in his annual state of the nation address in January 2020: ‘Russia has returned to international politics as a country whose opinion cannot be ignored’.¹¹ Third is managing the country's complex relationship with the West. This relates to the previous two priorities and combines rivalry with the need for cooperation.

Russia experts tend to agree that ‘Putinism’ – the nature and politics of the current regime – is here to stay.¹² In July 2020, a popular referendum agreed to reset the clock on Putin's presidential terms, allowing him to seek another two terms in the Kremlin, potentially stretching his presidency to 2036. Russia's sociopolitical system, which is run by a kleptocracy and riddled with endemic corruption,

is also unlikely to change in the foreseeable future. Various power circles related to business interests and state authority structures in intelligence, the police and the military fight for influence and prestige in a constantly revolving carousel of governance and business deals – including those made abroad. As a result, Russian governance is unpredictable and potentially unstable.

Thus, fuelled by this somewhat paranoid viewpoint, and an opportunistic and ‘macho’ foreign policy, Russia is unlikely to be on good terms with the West any time soon. While Russia is not generally currently considered a direct and immediate threat to Europe, it cannot be considered friendly in any way. Instead, in contrast to the Western liberal order, Russia champions a world system based on strong states, great power parity and spheres of influence.

Strengthening Russian Military Capabilities

Russia's armed forces underpin its increasingly ambitious foreign and security policy agenda. Over the past decade, the Russian defence budget has increased significantly and remains probably the third largest in the world. Given that Russia buys Russian weapons, falls and fluctuations in the value of the rouble have not much impacted its armed forces. Thus, certain international comparisons of defence spending are misleading as they focus on defence budgets rather than purchasing power parity.¹³ The latest modernisation programme, running since 2008, has largely been successful in making Russia's armed forces more agile and up to date. While endemic corruption, inefficiency, the loss of Ukrainian suppliers, low oil prices and financial problems have delayed many planned projects, the

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8. Julia Gurganus and Eugene Rumer, ‘Russia's Global Ambitions in Perspective’, Working Paper, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, February 2019.
 9. Oscar Jonsson, *The Russian Understanding of War: Blurring the Lines Between War and Peace* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2019).
 10. Dara Massicot, ‘Anticipating a New Russian Military Doctrine in 2020: What It Might Contain and Why It Matters’, *War on the Rocks*, 9 September 2019; see also Nicole Peterson (ed.), ‘Russian Strategic Intentions: A Strategic Multilayer Assessment (SMA) White Paper’, May 2019, <<https://nsiteam.com/social/wp-content/uploads/2019/05/SMA-TRADOC-Russian-Strategic-Intentions-White-Paper-PDF-1.pdf>>, accessed 30 August 2020.
 11. Vladimir Putin, ‘Presidential Address to the Federal Assembly’, 15 January 2020, <<http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/62582>>, accessed 30 August 2020.
 12. See, for example, Keir Giles, *Moscow Rules: What Drives Russia to Confront the West* (Washington, DC: Chatham House, 2019); Mark Galeotti, *We Need to Talk About Putin: How the West Gets Him Wrong* (London: Ebury Press, 2019); Mark Galeotti, *Russian Political War: Moving Beyond the Hybrid* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2019).
 13. Michael Kofman, ‘Russian Defense Spending is Much Larger, and More Sustainable Than It Seems’, *Defense News*, 3 May 2019; Pavel K Baev, ‘Is Russia Really Cutting Its Military Spending?’, *Eurasia Daily Monitor* (Vol. 16, No. 65, May 2019).

Russian armed forces are nonetheless in a much better position now compared with a decade ago.

Russia's new armament programme, the GPV 2027 (for the period 2018–27), gives an indication of Russian defence priorities in the years to come. In short, according to the Norwegian Intelligence Service, the GPV 2027 reaffirms the change in Russia's threat perception, and consequently provides an indication of procurement priorities and how its armed forces are to be used.¹⁴ It involves a move away from a unilateral emphasis on major direct military conflicts towards a more asymmetric, indirect and complex use of military means.

The Strategy of Active Defence and Limited Action

As mentioned above, the 'strategy of active defence' was introduced by Gerasimov in a speech on 2 March 2019. In many ways, this speech – a possible prelude to a new Russian military doctrine – takes stock of Russian military developments since 2008. Despite taking account of the integrated use of political, economic, informational and other non-military (hybrid) measures in modern conflict, Gerasimov strongly reaffirms the decisive role of the Russian armed forces. For example, key sections of the speech are devoted to Russia's advancements in firepower and the importance of force mobility and combat readiness.

Importantly, the active defence strategy – while presented as being a 'defensive' response to Western political and military encroachment – foresees active, even anticipatory, use of military force based on prediction. The importance of such prediction and scenario-based thinking appears to be reinforced by concerns regarding the breakdown of international arms control regimes and the ensuing unpredictability in military-political affairs – all of which Gerasimov blames on Washington's unilateral actions.¹⁵ Thus, for Gerasimov, seizing and upholding the strategic initiative has become increasingly important. Maintaining this initiative involves a set of measures aimed at strategically deterring and pre-emptively neutralising threats to Russian national security. Towards this end, Gerasimov urges the upgrading of nuclear and non-nuclear weapons.

He also draws attention to the utility of precision-strike capabilities in targeting the enemy's critical nodes, such as decision-making centres and missile launchers.¹⁶

Another concept introduced by Gerasimov in the speech was 'the strategy of limited action', relevant to the defence or promotion of Russian interests abroad.¹⁷ Thus, 'limited action' ties into a continuum of the use of force, from defending and preserving the core (the Russian state) to pursuing its state interests externally. Gerasimov's reference to Russia's experiences in Syria is important in this context. According to Gerasimov, Syria has provided important lessons not only for the development of military strategy and conduct (involving improved C4ISR, robotic systems and UAVs), but also for conducting 'humanitarian' and 'post-conflict settlement' operations abroad.¹⁸ In other words, the limited action approach and the utility of force becomes intertwined with foreign policy concerns and objectives. He also conceives of a Russia that, in a crisis that initially falls short of military conflict, is nevertheless prepared to threaten direct military intervention. In this way, he plays up the Russian armed forces' supporting role in the effective deployment of non-military means.

In short, seen in conjunction with Russia's heavy investment in advanced weapons systems, Gerasimov's active defence strategy suggests a Russia that has improved its military preparedness, as well as a general staff increasingly confident of the utility of military force across a spectrum of possible scenarios.

Precision-Strike Capabilities: The New Russian Silver Bullet?

In line with the perceived utility of precision-strike capabilities expressed by Gerasimov, the increased proliferation of – and potential reliance on – such weapons by Russia is profoundly changing the country's ability to deter, threaten or destroy an adversary.¹⁹ Russia's significant investments in precision-strike regimes, combined with innovative C4ISR systems and electronic warfare capabilities, may signal that the military-technological advantage enjoyed by the West since the 1990s is decreasing,

14. Norwegian Intelligence Service, 'Focus 2019', p. 27.

15. Gerasimov, speech given at the Annual Meeting of the Academy of Military Sciences.

16. *Ibid.*

17. *Ibid.*

18. *Ibid.*

19. Office of Naval Intelligence, 'The Russian Navy: A Historic Transition', December 2015, p. 33, <<https://fas.org/nuke/guide/russia/historic.pdf>>, accessed 30 August 2020.

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or even coming to an end.²⁰ Even so, the exact role of precision-strike weapons is reportedly subject to experimentation and discussion within the Russian military.²¹ While Gerasimov's speech provides clues, the evolution of thought surrounding their use and strategic effect seems fraught with innate tension between defensive and offensive orientations. This makes their actual intended use unknown to the outsider and therefore somewhat ambiguous.²² For the Russian military, the need for swift and continual strikes against the adversary, enabled by advanced reconnaissance and fire complexes, has been one of the most important lessons learned from Syria.²³ Indeed, precision-strike capabilities provide Russia with a broader range of options, for example allowing it to plan the level of enemy losses according to its aims of deterrence and coercion.²⁴ This would represent a particularly useful strategy of coercion in a limited conflict, as for example might take place in Russia's border regions.

In a large-scale conflict, high-impact precision strikes on the enemy's critical political, economic or military nodes might represent an attempt at escalation management very early in the conflict, with their use reinforced by the threat – although not necessarily intended use – of limited nuclear strikes.²⁵ One issue of concern, as Daniel Flynn notes, is the dual-use nature of some of the weapons, and the potential divide between military and civilian leadership thinking, which is likely to impede Russia's ability to clearly signal its intentions in a crisis, increasing the risk of miscalculation.²⁶ The

role of non-strategic nuclear weapons is discussed further below.

The Russian armed forces' international operations are made possible by their increased access to new capabilities and weapons systems. This has also shifted the borders that have traditionally delineated military operational theatres within Russian doctrinal thinking. By using long-range, high-speed precision weapons, Russia can expend minimal force striking at strategic targets from the rear – or from the sea – thereby forcing an adversary into submission without the Russian military having to enter the theatre of active conflict, let alone violate the sovereignty of other states until the moment of the attack.²⁷ In his speech, Gerasimov notably mentions Russia's newest weapons complexes, such as Avangard (hypersonic glide vehicle), Zircon (hypersonic sea-based missile) and Burevestnik (nuclear-powered, nuclear-tipped cruise missile), all of which have been test launched recently, according to news outlets.²⁸

Importantly, as can be inferred from Gerasimov's speech, current Russian doctrinal thinking emphasises offensive strikes and the initial phase of war as being decisive, rather than prolonged defence. Pre-emptive action is a key element here, with no contradiction perceived between the pre-emptive countering of an attack, a counter-offensive and being offensive. Moreover, Russian doctrine envisages precision-strike capabilities being used to neutralise an adversary's strategic assets, rather than necessarily for strategic interdiction.²⁹

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20. Andrew Radin et al., 'What Will Russian Military Capabilities Look Like in the Future?', RAND Research Brief, RB-10038-A, 2019; Roger N McDermott, *Russia's Electronic Warfare Capabilities to 2025: Challenging NATO in the Electromagnetic Spectrum* (Tallinn: International Centre for Defence and Security, 2017).
 21. Roger N McDermott and Tor Bukkvoll, *Russia in the Precision-Strike Regime: Military Theory, Procurement and Operational Impact* (Oslo: Norwegian Defence Research Establishment, 2017).
 22. Some interpret this ambiguity as a deliberate political strategy. See Bruno Tertrais, 'Russia's Nuclear Policy: Worrying for the Wrong Reasons', *Survival* (Vol. 60, No. 2, 2018), pp. 33–44.
 23. Alexander D Chekov et al., 'War of the Future: A View From Russia', *Survival* (Vol. 61, No. 6, 2019), p. 39.
 24. Roger N McDermott and Tor Bukkvoll, 'Tools of Future Wars — Russia is Entering the Precision-Strike Regime', *Journal of Slavic Military Studies* (Vol. 31, No. 2, 2018), pp. 198–201; Dave Johnson, 'Russia's Conventional Precision Strike Capabilities, Regional Crises, and Nuclear Thresholds', Livermore Papers on Global Security No. 3, Lawrence Livermore National Laboratory, Center for Global Security Research, February 2018.
 25. Daniel Flynn, 'Russia's Evolving Approach to Deterrence', in Nicole Peterson (ed.), 'Russian Strategic Intentions', A Strategic Multilayer Assessment (SMA) White Paper, May 2019.
 26. *Ibid.*
 27. Katarzyna Zysk, 'Escalation and Nuclear Weapons in Russia's Military Strategy', *RUSI Journal* (Vol. 163, No. 2, 2018), pp. 4–15.
 28. Gerasimov, speech given at the Annual Meeting of the Academy of Military Science; Dorian Archus, 'First Ship-Based Zircon Hypersonic Missile Test-Fired by Russian Navy', *Naval News*, 27 February 2020, <<https://navalnews.net/first-ship-based-zircon-hypersonic-missile-test-fired-by-russian-navy>>, accessed 30 August 2020; *BBC News*, 'Russia Deploys Avangard Hypersonic Missile System', 27 December 2019; Ankit Panda, 'Russia Conducts Test of Nuclear-Powered Cruise Missile', *The Diplomat*, 6 February 2019.
 29. Kofman, 'Russian Defense Spending'.

Over the past few years, several analyses have looked at how Russia might operationalise an anti-access/area denial (A2/AD) strategy, which would use precision-strike missile systems to create wider exclusion zones around key territories that NATO would want to reinforce during a conflict, such as the Black Sea, the Baltic Sea or the High North.³⁰ An oft-cited example is the routine deployment of the Iskander-M short-range ballistic missile system to Kaliningrad.³¹ At optimal performance, Poland, Sweden and the Baltic states would all be within its range.

However, the assumption of an overarching A2/AD threat is being challenged by critics, who argue that interdiction is only one tactical asset in Russia's operational planning.³² This makes the picture complex but not necessarily impenetrable. Some have even challenged the A2/AD assumption from a purely technical point of view, arguing that the Russian missile regime is less developed than it appears, and that a sustained A2/AD capability would be too expensive.³³ What is critical to note – but often missed in the debate – is that in a scenario in which Russia employs an A2/AD approach, Western forces would have to be willing to expose themselves to risk (possibly front line attrition) in order to saturate Russian systems. Moreover, they would have to plan for highly complex operations.³⁴

Some also note that Russia's precision-strike capability development increases the country's offensive potential, which in turn might make military force a more prominent tool of Russian foreign policy.³⁵ Gerasimov's remarks on 'limited actions' seem to support this view. Key actors in the Russian debate regarding future warfare also

emphasise indirect great power confrontation in proxy theatres.³⁶ On a more technical note, the fact that the Iskander system is mobile has led to assumptions that Russia might choose to use it as a trump card, moving it rapidly across the northwestern flank as necessary to conduct coercive 'Iskander diplomacy'.³⁷ According to official statements, all Russian missile land forces brigades have been rearmed with the Iskander systems,³⁸ in total 11 combat brigades of Iskander-M.

Russia's improved conventional precision-strike capabilities may lower the general threshold for the use of force. Given that both Russia and the US have withdrawn from the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty, the conventional and nuclear military balance in Europe will inevitably be reshaped, pushing first-strike capabilities – whether conventional or nuclear – to the fore. For example, in the immediate aftermath of the US withdrawal, Russia's defence minister Sergei Shoigu was quick to bury the treaty by declaring that, in 2020, Russia will create a ground-based version of the sea-based Kalibr system, as well as a ground-based missile system with a long-range hypersonic rocket.³⁹

Non-Strategic Nuclear Weapons

Improving nuclear deterrence measures, including new weapons complexes, is another of Gerasimov's areas of focus. Non-strategic nuclear weapons (NSNW), also called 'low-yield weapons', have caused particular concern in the West in recent years. In contrast to the strategic nuclear weapons, NSNWs are not primarily designed for deterrence, but rather for actual combat. The number of such

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30. See, for example, Edward R Lucas and Thomas Crosbie, 'Anti-Access/Area Denial in the Baltic Sea Region', *Scandinavian Journal of Military Studies* (Vol. 2, No. 1, 2019), pp. 72–73; Ruslan Minich, 'Russia Shows Its Military Might in the Black Sea and Beyond', *Atlantic Council Ukraine Alert*, 6 November 2018, <<https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/ukrainealert/russia-shows-its-military-might-in-the-black-sea-and-beyond/>>, accessed 30 August 2020.
 31. The Iskander-M SRBM has a maximum range of 500 km and carries payloads of between 480 kg and 700 kg. See, for example, Jonathan Marcus, 'Russia's Missile Deployment in Kaliningrad Ups the Stakes for Nato', *BBC News*, 9 October 2016; Richard Milne and Kathrin Hille, 'Baltic Concern Rises at Russian Missiles in Kaliningrad', *Financial Times*, 5 February 2018.
 32. See, for example, Keir Giles and Mathieu Boulegue, 'Russia's A2/AD Capabilities: Real and Imagined', *Parameters* (Vol. 49, No. 1/2, Spring/Summer 2019), p. 25.
 33. Robert Dalsjö, Christofer Berglund and Michael Jonsson, 'Bursting the Bubble: Russian A2/AD in the Baltic Sea Region: Capabilities, Countermeasures, and Implications', Swedish Defence Research Agency, FOI-R--4651—SE, March 2019; Giles and Boulegue, 'Russia's A2/AD Capabilities', p. 25.
 34. Giles and Boulegue, 'Russia's A2/AD Capabilities'.
 35. Norwegian Intelligence Service, 'Focus 2019', p. 22; Bukkvoll and McDermott, 'Russia in the Precision-Strike Regime', p. 39.
 36. Chekov et al., 'War of the Future', p. 38.
 37. CSIS Missile Defense Project, 'SS-26 Iskander', <<https://missilethreat.csis.org/missile/ss-26-2/>>, accessed 30 August 2020.
 38. *TASS*, 'All Land Troops Brigades Rearmed With Iskander Systems', 24 December 2019.
 39. Matthew Bodner, 'Russia Bids Farewell to INF Treaty with Fresh Nuclear Development Plans', *Defence News*, 6 February 2019.

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warheads in Russian storages is estimated to be about 2,000.⁴⁰ Of these, around 750 are in the Russian navy's possession. There are also several dual-use delivery systems available, launchable from air, land and sea. Kalibr cruise missiles are mounted on both submarines and other vessels, while Iskander missiles are ground-launched. The 9M729 Novator cruise missile (called SSC-8 by NATO), whose long range was used by the US as the trigger for the break-up of the INF Treaty, is another.⁴¹ Furthermore, Russian Tu-160 Blackjack bomber planes have been observed with dual-use, long-range cruise missiles (Raduga Kh-101/AS-23 Kodiak), which can reach the entirety of European territory either from the Russian heartland or the Norwegian Sea.⁴²

According to the US Nuclear Posture Review, it is 'Moscow's perception that its greater number and variety of non-strategic nuclear systems provide a coercive advantage in crises and at lower levels of conflict'.⁴³ These perceived advantages were confirmed by Putin in his 2020 state of the nation address when he declared that 'for the first time in the history of nuclear missile weapons, including the Soviet period and modern times, we are not catching up with anyone, but, on the contrary, other leading states have yet to create the weapons that Russia already possesses'.⁴⁴

The assessments of Russia's political leadership and expert communities show their strong consensus that the use of NSNWs is more likely today than a decade ago.⁴⁵ From a Western point of view, the fear is that the threshold for using these weapons is getting lower, and that Russia believes they can

be used to 'escalate to de-escalate'.⁴⁶ According to Katarzyna Zysk, Russia has previously reserved 'an option of a limited nuclear use at a scale that would aim to avoid escalation in order to compel the adversary to refrain from further action and back off'.⁴⁷

On 2 June 2020, the Russian government published a policy document outlining Russia's principles of nuclear deterrence, which sheds new light on this question. Formally entitled 'Basic Principles of State Policy of the Russian Federation on Nuclear Deterrence'⁴⁸ (henceforth 'document'), it is notable for its official clarifications and articulations of Russia's thinking – this kind of declassification is unprecedented. While the document mostly confirms established understandings of Russia's nuclear policy, some elements are particularly noteworthy.

On escalation and de-escalation, the document makes it clear that '[i]n the event of a military conflict, this Policy provides for the prevention of an escalation of military actions and their termination on conditions that are acceptable for the Russian Federation and/or its allies'.⁴⁹ While suggestive that a strategy of 'escalating to de-escalate' indeed exists, both Dmitri Trenin and Nikolai Sokov importantly point out that there should be a delineation between a general strategy of deterrence and the actual use of nuclear weapons.⁵⁰ In the section that seeks to clarify the conditions for the use of nuclear weapons, the document implies that Russia only foresees the use of nuclear weapons in response to attacks by nuclear or other types of weapons of mass destruction, or

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40. Pavel K Baev, 'PART I: The Re-Emerging Nuclear Dimension in Russian-European Relations', *Georgetown Journal of International Affairs*, 4 May 2019.
 41. Office of the Director of National Intelligence, 'Director of National Intelligence Daniel Coats on Russia's INF Treaty Violation', 30 November 2018, <<https://www.dni.gov/index.php/newsroom/speeches-interviews/item/1923-director-of-national-intelligence-daniel-coats-on-russia-s-inf-treaty-violation>>, accessed 30 August 2020; Steven Pifer, 'Russia Denies It Violates the INF Treaty. OK, Show It (Op-Ed)', *Moscow Times*, 22 January 2018.
 42. Douglas Barrie, 'Kh-101 Missile Test Highlights Russian Bomber Firepower', IISS Military Balance blog 8 February 2019, <www.iiss.org/blogs/military-balance/2019/02/russian-bomber-firepower>, accessed 31 August 2020; Lieutenant General Morten Haga Lunde, speech given at Oslo Military Society, 12 February 2019, <<https://oslomilsamfund.no/podcast/>>, accessed 15 September 2020.
 43. Office of the Secretary of Defense, 'Nuclear Posture Review', February 2018, pp. xi–xii.
 44. Putin, 'Presidential Address'.
 45. Chekov et al., 'War of the Future', p. 34; Ven Bruusgaard, 'Russian Strategic Deterrence'.
 46. Zysk, 'Escalation and Nuclear Weapons in Russia's Military Strategy', p. 4.
 47. *Ibid.*
 48. Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, 'Basic Principles of State Policy of the Russian Federation on Nuclear Deterrence', 8 June 2020, <https://www.mid.ru/en/web/guest/foreign_policy/international_safety/disarmament/-/asset_publisher/rp0fiUBmANaH/content/id/4152094>, accessed 15 July 2020.
 49. *Ibid.*
 50. Dmitri Trenin, 'Decoding Russia's Official Nuclear Deterrence Paper', Carnegie Moscow Center, 5 June 2020; Nikolai Sokov, 'Russia Clarifies Its Nuclear Deterrence Policy', Vienna Center for Disarmament and Non-Proliferation, 3 June 2020.

‘in the event of aggression against the Russian Federation with the use of conventional weapons when the *very existence of the state is in jeopardy*’.⁵¹

However, with regard to NSNWs and dual-use systems, the document does little to specify their employment. The naval doctrine from 2017, in contrast, did highlight the role of NSNWs in coercing adversaries to cease hostilities against Russia. With the development of high-precision systems, Zysk asserts that ‘the navy has “a qualitatively new task”, which is the destruction of the adversary’s military-economic potential by striking at its “vital” objects from the sea’.⁵² Another new feature of the document concerns the principles of ‘adaptability’ and ‘unpredictability’, the latter being a matter of scale, time and place for possible employment of forces and means. Intuitively, these principles may be associated with tactical or dual-use systems, but the classification of dual-use systems remains unarticulated in the document.

Scholars such as Kristin Ven Bruusgaard are critical of the perceived notion of Russia having a ‘lowered nuclear threshold’.⁵³ Compared with 10–15 years ago, Russia’s conventional capabilities have increased significantly, resulting in, according to Ven Bruusgaard, the threshold for using nuclear weapons rising in parallel. With more weapons systems at its disposal, Russia is less reliant on NSNWs than a decade ago. Furthermore, in 2019, Putin asserted that Russia has a ‘launch on attack’ – rather than pre-emptive – nuclear policy, which the recently published nuclear policy document seems to support.⁵⁴ Alexander D Chekov and colleagues also argue that the predominant view within Russian decision-making circles is that a nuclear confrontation is undesirable, therefore making it seem unlikely to happen.⁵⁵ This, though, is not necessarily due to the deterrent effect of Western nuclear arsenals, but rather because many in Russia

do not see nuclear weapons as the most effective way of targeting and weakening the country’s adversaries. Instead, other types of strategic competition are assessed as being preferable.⁵⁶ In this context, an interesting feature of the nuclear policy document that has been less discussed is the increasingly intertwined references to conventional and non-conventional situations. For example, in addition to the expected policy of nuclear retaliation for an enemy’s use of nuclear weapons against Russia, the document also foresees the use of nuclear weapons in the event of aggression with the use of conventional weapons which threaten the very existence of the Russian state.⁵⁷ However, notions in the document such as state ‘sovereignty’ remain vague. As Sokov asks, is the term a matter of international law, or regime survival?⁵⁸ In addition, developments that Russia considers dangerous and worthy of nuclear deterrence include NATO’s use of force and non-nuclear offensive capabilities, as well as missile defence systems. From the document it is abundantly clear that the Russian political and military leadership’s primary concern is a major conventional attack on Russia.⁵⁹ This again raises the question of Russia’s perceptions of the utility of pre-emptive, limited nuclear strikes.

In terms of the contemporary context, it is therefore probably most helpful to regard NSNWs in conjunction with Russia’s focus on conventional means, including its own precision-strike weapons systems capabilities. Indeed, the concept of non-nuclear deterrence was introduced in the 2014 doctrine: ‘A complex of foreign policy, military and military-technical measures aimed at preventing aggression against the Russian Federation through non-nuclear means’.⁶⁰ This, arguably, indicates a seamless integration of nuclear, conventional and non-military capabilities to influence and coerce adversaries in times of peace, conflict and war.⁶¹

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51. Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, ‘Basic Principles of State Policy of the Russian Federation on Nuclear Deterrence’, para. 17. Authors’ emphasis.
 52. Zysk, ‘Escalation and Nuclear Weapons’, p. 7.
 53. Kristin Ven Bruusgaard, ‘The Myth of Russia’s Lowered Nuclear Threshold’, *War on the Rocks*, 22 September 2017.
 54. Massicot, ‘Anticipating a New Russian Military Doctrine in 2020’.
 55. Chekov et al., ‘War of the Future’, p. 34.
 56. *Ibid.*, p. 34.
 57. Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, ‘Basic Principles of State Policy of the Russian Federation on Nuclear Deterrence’, para. 17.
 58. Sokov, ‘Russia Clarifies Its Nuclear Deterrence Policy’.
 59. *Ibid.*
 60. Permanent Mission of the Russian Federation to NATO, ‘The Military Doctrine of The Russian Federation’, 25 December 2014, para. 8, clause m, <https://missiontonato.mid.ru/web/nato-en/documents/-/asset_publisher/wzzhDmXD4DYq/content/the-military-doctrine-of-the-russian-federation?inheritRedirect=false>, accessed 30 August 2020.
 61. Ven Bruusgaard, ‘The Myth of Russia’s Lowered Nuclear Threshold’.

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In 2017, Shoigu asserted that the development of high-precision weapons may allow Russia to set aside nuclear deterrence in favour of conventional deterrence.⁶² While only one anecdote, it suggests that Russian thinking about future conflict, and the nature and scaling of force employment – nuclear and non-nuclear – challenge traditional concepts of escalation where pathways are linear and somewhat predictable from low-level conventional crises to nuclear war. This could also include the active use of non-military measures that aim at manipulating the adversary's perspective prior to armed conflict.⁶³ Shoigu's statement, seen in the context of Russia's capability-based advantages, can be interpreted as reconfiguring the traditional concept of tactical nuclear deterrence: for example, rather than threatening a nuclear strike, Russia may instead threaten a set of high-precision and high-impact strikes severe enough to degrade the enemy's military-economic potential.

The Russian Navy

Ever since its military modernisation programme was conceived, Russia has had an ambition to restore a blue water navy by 2050. This, though, has been put on hold due to several factors. The quality and capability of Russia's shipyards are varied, while economic sanctions have also had some impact on shipbuilding.⁶⁴ Additionally, there is an ongoing debate about the viability of larger vessels in a conflict dominated by cruise missiles.⁶⁵ In practice, these factors have prompted Russia to pursue

a pragmatic solution, which currently involves developing more modest maritime platforms, such as frigates and corvettes. Russia has nevertheless sought to convert these into strategic assets by arming them with heavy weapons, such as the Kalibr cruise missile. Indeed, Russia has invested significantly in conventional maritime capabilities, and is likely to continue to do so in the years to come.⁶⁶ From the Western point of view, the challenge represented by Russia's investment in submarines and smaller, heavily armed vessels is that these capabilities are hard to detect and respond to.

While this direction seems to have been pursued mainly due to economic considerations, it may also force a shift in Russian operational thinking. For example, littoral areas such as the Norwegian coast will be particularly valuable for Russia in the event of a conflict with the West, as they will be needed to establish a coastal rim of denial involving deployment of Russia's small vessels and long-range, precision-strike capabilities. This could be reinforced by onshore anti-air and anti-ship assets and would – among other consequences – severely threaten North Atlantic sea lines of communication (SLOCs).⁶⁷

In 2014, the Northern Fleet was established as a separate Joint Strategic Command and remains key to Russia's nuclear second-strike capability. As of 1 January 2021, the fleet will become Russia's fifth military district – the first time a fleet becomes equal to a geographic military district.⁶⁸ One of the most important long-term Russian investments in strategic capabilities is the *Borei*-class ballistic-

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62. Sergei Shoigu, quoted in Russian Ministry of Defence, 'Ministr oborony Rossii provel ustanovochnyu lektsiyu kursa "Armiya i obshchestvo"' ['Russia's Minister of Defence Held an Overview Lecture at the Course "Army and Society"'], 12 January 2017.
 63. Flynn, 'Russia's Evolving Approach to Deterrence', p. 39.
 64. Paul Goble, 'Any Russian Naval Expansion Is Many Years Away', *Eurasia Daily Monitor* (Vol. 15, No. 7, 18 January 2018).
 65. Anatoly Tsyganok, 'Voyna na morye v XXI veke' ['War at Sea in the 21st Century'], *Nezavisimaja Gazeta*, 5 April 2019, <https://nvo.ng.ru/nvo/2019-04-05/1_1040_war.html>, accessed 15 September 2020; Ilya Kramnik, '19 tisyach. ton mechti: postroit li Rossiya korabel' budushevo' ['19 Thousand Tons of Dreams: Will Russia Build the Ship of the Future?'], *Izvestiya*, 2 March 2019, <<https://iz.ru/851789/ilia-kramnik/19-tys-tonn-mechty-postroit-li-rossiya-korabl-budushchego>>, accessed 15 September 2020; Andrey Kots, 'Vnuki linkorov. Samiye groznye raketniye korabli strani mira' ['Grandchildren of Battleships. The Most Formidable Rocket Ships in the World'], *RIA Novosti*, 10 March 2018, <<https://ria.ru/20180310/1515978119.html>>, accessed 15 September 2020.
 66. *Euronews*, 'Putin Reveals Plan to Expand Russia's Navy with 40 New Vessels', 26 July 2020.
 67. John Andreas Olsen (ed.), *NATO and the North Atlantic: Revitalising Collective Defence*, RUSI Whitehall Paper 87 (Abingdon: Routledge, 2017); Ståle Ulriksen, 'Den russiske marinen: status og fremtidsutsikter' ['The Russian Navy: Status and Future Outlook'], *Necesse* (Vol. 2, No. 2, 2017), pp. 34–46; Ståle Ulriksen and Åse Gilje Østensen, 'Building on Strength: Proposals for US–Norwegian Cooperation on the Operational and Tactical Level', Concept Paper 2/2019, Norwegian Naval Academy, 2019; Ina Holst-Pedersen Kvam, 'Nordflåtens evne til kystnær maktprosjeksjon: Implikasjoner for Bastionforsvaret' ['The Northern Fleet's Capacity to Project Force in the Littoral: Implications for the Bastion Defence'], *Necesse* (Vol. 5, No. 1, 2020), pp. 22–58.
 68. Thomas Nilsen, 'Putin Heightens the Strategic Role of the Northern Fleet', *Barents Observer*, 8 June 2020.

missile submarine. So far, three units have been completed and are sailing with the Northern and Pacific Fleets.⁶⁹ In total, the Northern Fleet currently has about six operational strategic nuclear submarines (SSBNs) and between seven and nine operational nuclear attack submarines (SSNs/SSGNs).⁷⁰ It is the SSN/SSGN attack submarines that have most concerned the West recently, of which the *Yasen*-class submarine is the newest and least detectable.⁷¹ One submarine is currently operational, another is in sea trials (the *Kazan*), five more are under construction, and two more have been ordered. The *Yasen*-class, which can carry both conventional and nuclear missiles, is considered a particular threat to naval group formations – and therefore NATO’s transatlantic SLOCs – due to its anti-ship missiles.⁷² The new *Admiral Gorshkov*-class frigate can also be equipped with Kalibr or other kinds of precision missiles, with more ships of this class expected to be delivered over the next few years.⁷³ Recently, the Russian navy also announced that it intended equipping its latest *Gremyashchiy*-class corvettes in the Pacific with hypersonic anti-ship cruise

missiles.⁷⁴ These new Russian maritime capabilities represent an increased capacity to strike targets on land, but they may also threaten offshore oil and gas infrastructure.⁷⁵

The Russian navy has also sought to achieve better strategic impacts by moving its naval platforms and concentrating them between key theatres, as recently demonstrated during Exercise *Ocean Shield*, which featured a Russian flotilla of vessels from the Northern, Baltic and Black Sea Fleets.⁷⁶ Russia has also used the Black Sea, Pacific and Northern Fleets to provide air defence for Russian units in Syria. The Black Sea Fleet has gained status as a multi-regional force due to its tactical versatility and ability to despatch rapidly to the Mediterranean Sea. In Syria, perhaps even more interesting was the way in which Russia used a mixed and greatly enhanced system of SLOCs and air lines of communication, thereby demonstrating that it has started to overcome its traditional reliance on rail for logistics and projecting power well beyond its periphery.⁷⁷ Two helicopter-carrier ships are reportedly being built in the Black Sea to support such operations.⁷⁸ There are, nonetheless, limits to the volume of forces Russia

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69. Russia’s maritime strategic priorities also include continuing the renewal of its old nuclear submarines until the new *Borei*-class fleet has been completed.
70. The Northern Fleet consists of two *Victor IIIs*, four *Sierra Is* and *Sierra IIs*, six *Akulas* and three *Oscar IIs*, plus the *Severodvinsk* and the *Kazan*, making a total of 17 submarines, plus some special submarines and some older diesel submarines. It is assessed that one *Victor III*, two *Sierra IIs*, one *Akula*, two to three *Oscar IIs*, the *Severodvinsk* and maybe the *Kazan* are operational: totalling seven to nine SSNs/SSGNs. In addition, the Northern Fleet currently has about seven larger battleships operational (one battle cruiser, one cruiser, four destroyers and one frigate), and some under long-term overhaul. More corvettes are expected in the next few years. In addition, it has three regiments of fighter jets, five helicopter squadrons, three air-defence regiments, two mechanised infantry brigades and one naval infantry brigade. This is a corrective note, as IISS numbers are frequently too high due to the inclusion of non-operational units. See IISS, *The Military Balance 2019* (London: International Institute of Strategic Studies, 2019); Ulriksen, ‘Den russiske marinen’ [‘The Russian Navy’].
71. Norwegian Intelligence Service, ‘Focus 2019’, p. 25.
72. Rolf Tamnes, ‘The Significance of the North Atlantic and the Norwegian Contribution’, in Olsen (ed.), *NATO and the North Atlantic*, p. 25.
73. Franz-Stefan Gady, ‘Russia’s New *Admiral Gorshkov*-Class Stealth Frigate Enters Final Shipbuilder’s Trials’, *The Diplomat*, 14 August 2019.
74. H I Sutton, ‘Russian Navy to Deploy New Zircon Hypersonic Missile to Pacific’, *Forbes*, 5 November 2019.
75. Magnus F Nordenman, ‘Five Questions NATO Must Answer in the North Atlantic’, *US Naval Institute Proceedings* (Vol. 145/3/1,393, 2019).
76. IISS, *The Military Balance 2019*, pp. 174–75.
77. Roger N McDermott, ‘Russia’s Strategic Mobility and Its Military Deployment in Syria’, RUFBS Briefing No. 31, Swedish Defence Research Agency, September 2015.
78. *TASS Navy Recognition*, ‘Russian MoD Signs Contract for Two Project 23900 Helicopter Carriers LHD’, 27 May 2020, <<https://www.navyrecognition.com/index.php/news/defence-news/2020/may-2020/8485-russian-mod-signs-contract-for-two-project-23900-helicopter-carriers-lhd.html>>, accessed 30 August 2020.

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can move by air and sea. Larger deployments will still rely on land-based logistics.

Conclusions

Although Russia is not currently regarded as an *imminent* military threat to NATO or EU states, its volatile socio-political system means that for most Western countries it is an uncomfortably unpredictable neighbour. Russia's continued criticism of Western values and institutions, combined with continual non-conventional attacks on Western democratic institutions and digital infrastructure, reinforces this.

The active defence strategy, alongside an approach of 'limited actions', speaks of a general staff that has grown more confident and proactive when it comes to instrumentalising Russian military power in neutralising threats to Russia, but equally in its pursuit of foreign and security policy objectives. As a result, a doctrine may evolve that encompasses local defence as well as global ambition. Considering the qualitative improvement and readiness of the Russian armed forces, and the general professionalisation of its staff, it would allow Russia to proactively engage desired targets to pre-emptively, even surgically, remove them as threats to state security. This applies across a spectrum of future scenarios, not only in Russia's geographical vicinity but globally, and includes developing the means to bridge the gap with the West as well as using advanced weapon complexes in a game of political-military coercion. The Russian navy is now better equipped to project power beyond Russia's borders. New classes of submarines and smaller, heavily armed vessels have added agility and manoeuvrability. Thus, the forthcoming doctrine may focus on increased firepower and mobility, and armed forces which in the future should be capable of conducting complex joint operations that span the

entire use-of-force spectrum. Russia is today testing equipment and doctrines through its operations in Syria, enabling its military forces to become ever-more potent and combat ready.

Even so, Russia's limited resources prevent it from fighting a protracted war against a near-peer adversary. The result is a Russian military forced to think outside the box, both in terms of means and methods. Winning conflicts quickly and selectively, in limited yet decisive ways, are likely to be general principles in a new doctrine. Precision-guided cruise missiles are of particular use to Russia and equally a concern to Russia's adversaries, as they offer the potential for long-distance strikes against European states with minimal warning. In the event of escalating political conflict, Russia's future doctrine may consider that it will achieve more by a first-strike approach than by waiting for a broader Western mobilisation during a crisis build-up.⁷⁹ Should Russia indeed plan to pursue a strategy of seamlessly integrating tactical nuclear weapons with conventional weapons, the fact that many of these missiles are dual-use poses a very worrisome challenge. If, in a future Russian constellation of power, its military leaders are hawkish and its political leaders are weak, this will be a highly concerning scenario. ■

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79. Michael Kofman and Anya Loukianova Fink, 'Escalation Management and Nuclear Employment in Russian Military Strategy', *War on the Rocks*, 23 June 2020.