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Russia Revises Nuclear Use Doctrine

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By Daryl G. Kimball

The Kremlin announced on Nov. 19 that Russian President Vladimir Putin signed a decree updating the government's formal policy on the possible use of nuclear weapons. The document outlines a wider range of contingencies that might trigger nuclear weapons use, especially in regard to non-nuclear weapons threats to Russia and its allies, and appears to lower the threshold for nuclear use.

The update of Russia's nuclear doctrine was previewed by Putin in comments delivered on Sept. 25. (See *ACT*, November 2024.) It was issued just days after it was reported that U.S. President Joe Biden had decided to authorize Ukraine's use of U.S.-supplied long-range missiles to strike targets deeper into Russia as a means of thwarting ongoing Russian attacks on Ukrainian territory. Russia had warned that such a U.S. move would change the nature of the conflict.



This photograph taken at a forensic expert center in Ukraine shows missile parts collected at the impact site in the town of Dnipro following an attack on Nov. 21. On that date, Russia fired an experimental missile at Ukraine, U.S. and other Western officials said. (Photo by Roman Pilipey/AFP via Getty Images)

The revised nuclear doctrine includes language asserting that Russia "reserves the right" to use nuclear weapons not only in response to a nuclear attack, but also to respond to a conventional weapons attack that creates a "critical threat" to its "sovereignty and territorial integrity" or to that of Russia's ally, Belarus. The previous version of Russia's nuclear weapons doctrine, issued in 2020, reserves the right to use nuclear weapons if an attack on Russia threatens "the very existence of the state."

The new document, titled "Fundamentals of the State Policy of the Russian Federation in the Field of Nuclear Deterrence," states that Russia considers "nuclear weapons as a means of deterrence, the use of which is an extreme and necessary measure, and is making all necessary efforts to reduce the nuclear threat and prevent the aggravation of interstate relations that could provoke military conflicts, including nuclear conflicts."

The revised policy also states that Russia may use nuclear weapons in the event there is "reliable information on the launch of ballistic missiles attacking the territories of the Russian Federation and/or its allies" or "the use by the enemy of nuclear or other types of weapons of mass destruction on the territory of the Russian Federation and/or its allies, on military formations and/or facilities of the Russian Federation located outside its territory."

It says that Russia may use nuclear weapons in the event of "aggression against the Russian Federation and/or the Republic of Belarus…with the use of conventional weapons, creating a critical threat to their sovereignty and/or territorial integrity." Another scenario involves a response to the "receipt of reliable information on the massive launch (take-off) of aerospace attack weapons (strategic and tactical aircraft, cruise missiles, unmanned, hypersonic and other aircraft) and their crossing of the state border of the Russian Federation."

In contrast, the Biden administration's 2022 Nuclear Posture Review asserts that the "fundamental purpose" of U.S. nuclear weapons is to deter nuclear attack and that nuclear weapons use would be reserved for "extreme circumstances to defend the vital interests of the United States or its allies and partners."

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