

Russia's Nuclear and Coercive Signaling During the War in Ukraine

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Since the start of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, Russian President Vladimir Putin has invoked—and the Russian military has demonstrated—Russia's strategic capabilities to discourage the U.S. and other NATO governments from intervening. On November 18, 2024, Putin [codified](#) changes to Russia's nuclear declaratory policy that broadened the range of nuclear employment scenarios. On November 21, in what Putin [said](#) was a response to Ukraine's strikes with U.S. and U.K. weapons on targets inside Russia, Russia demonstrated what Department of Defense (DOD) officials [described](#) as an “experimental intermediate-range ballistic missile” by striking a defense plant in Ukraine.

Over the past two years, the Biden Administration and Congress have imposed sanctions on Russia and supported Ukraine with military and other assistance. (See CRS In Focus IF12277, *Russia's War on Ukraine: U.S. Policy and the Role of Congress*.) They also have debated the appropriate scope of U.S. aid to Ukraine and the credibility of Putin's threats. Some Members of Congress have argued the Biden Administration's [gradual approach](#) to transferring aid to Ukraine has been too receptive to Russian nuclear threats and potentially too risk averse. Others have contended that U.S. aid to Ukraine is drawing resources away from other priorities and should slow or [cease](#).

Congress may consider monitoring Putin's rhetoric and Russian military activities or [other](#) threats to the U.S. homeland as well as to facilities and personnel abroad. It may consider consulting with the executive branch and the intelligence community on signals of further Russian escalation, and exploring potential U.S. responses in briefings or hearings. It may also consider continuing to provide oversight of U.S. executive branch policy on the war in Ukraine and of U.S. assistance to regional allies and partners.

Russian Nuclear and Coercive Signaling To Date

Since February 2022, President Putin has [invoked](#) Russia's strategic capabilities, including its nuclear weapons, in an apparent attempt to deter Western military intervention against Russia in response to its invasion of Ukraine. The Russian military has demonstrated and exercised its nuclear and nuclear-capable systems and engaged in military activities close to U.S. and NATO allies' borders. Putin also declared that Russia has stationed nuclear weapons in Belarus and suspended its implementation of the U.S.-Russian New START arms control agreement, among other [signals](#) to the West.

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Russian [signaling](#) to date appears to be generally consistent with Russia's "[strategic deterrence](#)" political-military concept that envisions a range of nonmilitary and military (nonnuclear and nuclear) actions aimed at deterring and managing threats to Russia in peacetime, crisis, and wartime. Strategic deterrence also in theory could involve actions in [space and cyberspace](#) and the targeting of an opponent's [critical infrastructure](#) as part of Russian escalation management or intrawar deterrence in regional and global war.

A 2024 U.S. intelligence community assessment [stated](#), "Russia almost certainly does not want a direct military conflict with U.S. and NATO forces." Russia has thus potentially sought to respond with asymmetric measures, including by reportedly providing [assistance](#) to the Houthis, engaging in [sabotage](#) and other disruptive activities in Europe, and by deepening its collaboration with [North Korea](#) and Iran.

Debates About the Credibility of Nuclear Threats

According to Russian declaratory policy, the President makes the decision to employ nuclear weapons. It remains unknown, based on [open source information](#), whether Putin has seriously considered the use of nuclear weapons—whether for signaling or on military targets—since February 2022 and, if so, whether any [Western](#) or other [global efforts](#) have worked to dissuade him.

U.S. and NATO officials have debated the credibility of Russian nuclear threats, while [conceding](#) that they have constrained U.S. and NATO actions in support of Ukraine. A 2024 U.S. intelligence community assessment [stated](#), "Russia's inability to achieve quick and decisive battlefield wins, coupled with Ukrainian strikes within Russia, continues to drive concerns that Putin might use nuclear weapons."

Some Russian analysts have [called](#) for limited nuclear use, arguing that, while Russian threats may have successfully deterred direct U.S. and NATO intervention, Russian efforts to limit Western aid to Ukraine have failed.

Putin's Changes to Declaratory Policy

In September 2024, Putin [stated](#) that he would view U.S. and other NATO states' permission for Ukraine to use long-range precision strike systems on targets inside Russia as direct participation of Western countries in the war. The prospect of an attack on Russia involving Western [aerospace assets](#) has long been a [matter of concern](#) to the Russian military. In a separate meeting in September, Putin [announced](#) changes to Russia's nuclear declaratory policy.

These changes, formalized in November 2024, broadened the range of scenarios for nuclear weapons employment to include scenarios whereby Russia receives "reliable information about" the beginning of a massed aerospace attack or responds to a conventional attack against Russia or Belarus that "creates a critical threat to their sovereignty and (or) territorial integrity." The new policy also considers "an aggression" by "any nonnuclear state, but with participation or with support from a nuclear state," a "joint attack" by these states. It is unknown how this declaratory policy will be translated into Russia's nuclear employment planning. (See CRS In Focus IF12672, *Russia's Nuclear Weapons*.)

On November 21, after Ukraine reportedly [used](#) U.S. ATACMS ballistic missiles and U.K. Storm Shadow cruise missiles on targets in Russia, the Russian military reportedly [struck](#) a Ukrainian military plant with an experimental missile. In a speech that same day, Putin [said](#) the use of Western systems against targets inside Russia has given the "regional conflict in Ukraine ... elements of a global nature." He further stated that Russia has the right to "use [its] weapons against the military facilities of ... countries that allow their weapons to be used against our facilities, and [that,] in the event of an escalation," it would respond "decisively." In separate remarks, he also stated that Russia would continue to test this missile, [reportedly](#) a nuclear-capable intermediate-range ballistic missile with multiple warheads, in combat. In a subsequent

press briefing, DOD officials [stated](#) that while they “take seriously the rhetoric coming out of Russia,” the United States is “going to continue to focus on what Ukraine needs on the battlefield.”

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