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Russia's Nuclear Weapons

According to the Pentagon's 2026 National Defense Strategy, Russia "possesses the world's largest nuclear arsenal, which it continues to modernize and diversify, as well as undersea, space, and cyber capabilities that it could employ against the U.S. Homeland."

Since Russia's February 2022 invasion of Ukraine, Russian President Vladimir Putin has invoked Russia's nuclear weapons in an apparent attempt to deter Western military intervention against Russia in Ukraine and stated that Russia has deployed nonstrategic nuclear weapons to its ally Belarus. The 2010 New START Treaty that limited U.S. and Russian strategic nuclear forces expired in February 2026, though Russian officials then stated that Russia would continue to abide by the treaty's central limits—1,550 warheads on 700 deployed strategic nuclear delivery vehicles and a total of 800 deployed and nondeployed strategic nuclear delivery vehicles—as long as the United States did so. Congress may choose to examine U.S. deterrence and risk reduction policy toward Russia, including whether or not to support future arms control.

Force Structure

According to a 2025 estimate from the Federation of American Scientists (FAS) (the most recent available for the country), Russia has around 1,718 deployed nuclear warheads based on a triad of strategic delivery vehicles roughly consisting of 330 intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBMs), 12 ballistic-missile submarines (SSBNs) with 192 submarine-launched ballistic missiles (SLBMs), and 58 strategic bombers. According to a 2026 FAS estimate, the United States has around 1,770 deployed nuclear warheads.

The U.S. intelligence community's 2026 Annual Threat Assessment (ATA) states that Russia "is modernizing its nuclear weapons capabilities in the face of multiple failed tests of new systems." Russia deploys the majority of its strategic nuclear warheads on ICBMs. A separate Russian military service, the Strategic Rocket Forces, commands these silo-based and mobile ICBMs. Russia can field most of its ICBMs and all of its SLBMs with multiple warheads on each missile. In a March 2026 testimony, U.S. Strategic Command (STRATCOM) Commander Admiral Richard Correll stated that Russia has around 2,600 deployed and nondeployed strategic nuclear warheads.

Russia also has a variety of dual-capable systems (which are able to use conventional or nuclear warheads), including precision strike missiles, of various ranges and modes of launch that are not limited by any arms control agreements. The Russian military could deploy these systems with nuclear warheads, enabling their use as nonstrategic nuclear weapons (NSNW). Russia has rejected U.S. efforts to negotiate limits on NSNW, describing these weapons as an offset to U.S. and NATO conventional superiority. Admiral Correll stated in March 2026 that Russia had "up to 2,000 warheads" intended for NSNW; a FAS estimate attributes 1,477 warheads to these systems. According to a 2026 Department of State report, "there are as- yet no indications of a large-scale increase in the overall numbers of warheads assigned these roles."

Russian officials have expressed concerns about the survivability of Russian strategic nuclear forces, given advances in U.S. long-range conventional strike and missile defenses. In 2018, President Putin stated that Russia was developing new capabilities, including an ICBM-mounted hypersonic glide vehicle, a nuclear-powered cruise missile, and a nuclear-capable autonomous underwater system. The latter two systems were tested in 2025, according to a 2026 Defense Intelligence Agency (DIA) statement. According to 2025 testimony of U.S. Northern Command (NORTHCOM) Commander General Gregory Guillot, "if fielded," these novel Russian capabilities "will severely challenge [the U.S.] ability to detect and characterize an inbound attack and determine an appropriate response during a conflict."

In 2024, U.S. officials expressed concerns about Russia's plans to launch a nuclear-armed satellite into space. A 2025 DIA statement indicated that Russia believes that a "satellite capable of carrying a nuclear device," among other counterspace capabilities, "will deter Western adversaries reliant on space and enable [Russia] to disrupt or destroy Western satellites should deterrence fail."

Doctrine and Employment Plans

According to a November 2024 revision of Russia's nuclear declaratory policy, Russian nuclear deterrence policy seeks to maintain nuclear forces at a "sufficient" level that "guarantees the protection of sovereignty and territorial integrity," deters aggression, and enables escalation management, as well as the "cessation" of hostilities on "terms acceptable" to Russia. The document adds that the Russian president could authorize nuclear weapons employment in the following scenarios: (1) "the receipt of reliable data" about a ballistic missile attack against Russian or allied territory, (2) the use by an adversary of "nuclear and other weapons of mass destruction" against Russia or an ally, (3) adversary actions on government or military targets that could affect Russia's ability to retaliate with nuclear weapons, (4) a conventional "aggression against" Russia and (or) Belarus that poses "a critical threat to their sovereignty and (or) territorial integrity," and (5) "the receipt of reliable data" about a "massive launch (take-off) of air and space attack means" and "their crossing of [Russia's] state border." The document also states that Russia considers "aggression" by "any non-nuclear state with the participation or support of a nuclear state" a "joint attack" against Russia. While this declaratory policy revision broadens the range of Russia's potential nuclear

employment scenarios, it is unknown how the Russian military will translate it into changes in Russia's nuclear employment planning.

Russian political and military leaders have articulated a "strategic deterrence" concept that combines nonmilitary means, nonnuclear capabilities, and nuclear weapons into a spectrum of continuous actions aimed at deterrence, escalation management, and warfighting. The 2024 ATA said that "Russia is expanding and modernizing" its dual-capable systems "because Moscow believes [they] offer options to deter adversaries, control the escalation of potential hostilities, and counter U.S. and Allied conventional forces." Western studies of authoritative Russian military writings depict several potential variants of "ladders" involving steps with dual-capable systems the Russian military could take to deter or manage escalation.

The Russian military plans for the use of military force through a system of "strategic operations." According to some nongovernmental sources, some of these operations may foresee large-scale as well as limited use of nuclear weapons. Other strategic operations may provide Russia with flexible coercive options below the nuclear threshold. According to General Guillot's 2026 testimony, Russia could employ conventional precision strike missiles and other nonnuclear capabilities on U.S. critical infrastructure "in an attempt to degrade political will, disrupt force flows, and terminate a conflict on terms acceptable to Russia."

Russian Coercive Signaling

Since February 2022, President Putin has made public references to Russia's nuclear weapons, including signaling through announcements about Russia's increased nuclear readiness, exercises, capability demonstrations, missile tests, and changes in nuclear declaratory policy. In February 2023, President Putin noted the possibility of Russian nuclear tests if the United States were to engage in such testing. Russia, which maintains a nuclear testing capability at a test site in the Arctic, withdrew its ratification of the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty in November 2023.

Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko stated in April 2024 that Russia deployed "several dozen" nuclear weapons to Belarus. The DIA stated in 2025 that Russia is "expanding its nuclear posture to Belarus by establishing missile and nuclear-capable aircraft capabilities, renovating a nuclear weapons storage site, and training Belarusian crews to handle tactical nuclear weapons."

Some experts in Russia have called for limited nuclear strikes and changes to declaratory policy, arguing that Russian threats have not deterred Western military aid to Ukraine. Western analysts have debated the credibility of Putin's nuclear threats and signaling. According to a 2025 DIA statement, "Russia almost certainly seeks to avoid direct conflict with NATO because it assesses it cannot win a conventional military confrontation with the alliance."

Throughout the war in Ukraine, U.S. officials have voiced concerns that Russia may employ a nuclear weapon. More recently, a 2025 DIA statement posited that "Russia is very unlikely to use nuclear weapons in the conflict unless Russian leadership judged it faced an existential threat to the regime." At the same time, the 2026 ATA stated, "The most dangerous threat posed by Russia to the U.S. is an escalatory spiral in an ongoing conflict such as Ukraine or a new conflict that led to direct hostilities, including nuclear exchanges."

Arms Control and Risk Reduction

Since the 1962 Cuban Missile Crisis, the United States and Russia have periodically engaged in efforts to reduce the risks of nuclear war and negotiated agreements to limit and reduce their nuclear weapons. (See CRS In Focus IF12964, *U.S.-Russian Nuclear Arms Control: Overview and Potential Considerations for Congress*.) The United States and Russia have not met to discuss future arms control since January 2022. President Putin had said that Russia would not discuss arms control while the United States seeks to inflict "strategic defeat" on Russia by providing military aid to Ukraine. A 2022 National Intelligence Council assessment stated that Russia "probably still sees value in strategic nuclear arms control as a means to constrain the United States."

In February 2023, President Putin announced that Russia would suspend its participation in the New START Treaty. Russian officials said Russia would maintain treaty central limits but discontinue on-site inspections and data exchanges. In a 2026 annual report to Congress, the State Department stated that "Russia was probably close to the deployed warhead limit during much of the year and likely exceeded [it] toward the end of 2025" but "assesses with high confidence" that Russia did not carry out "any large-scale activity above the Treaty limits in 2025." The report stated that while the United States could not "certify" that Russia was compliant with New START, the department did not "determine" that "Russia's noncompliance" threatened U.S. "national security interests."

In September 2025, President Putin stated that Russia would continue to abide by New START central limits after the treaty's February 5, 2026, expiration date if the United States did so. (See CRS Insight IN12640, *Extension of New START Central Limits: Overview of the Expert Debate*.) On February 5, 2026, President Donald J. Trump posted on social media that "rather than extend" New START, the United States "should" negotiate a "new, improved, and modernized Treaty." On February 11, Russian officials stated that Russia would abide by New START central limits as long as the United States did so.

Some Members of Congress have debated the issue of nuclear arms control with Russia. Through intelligence community briefings and other oversight activities, Congress may continue to track Russia's nuclear modernization and any increases in its strategic and nonstrategic nuclear capabilities. Congress also may continue to authorize and appropriate funds for, as well as conduct oversight of, the executive branch's efforts to deter threats from Russia. Congress may further examine the executive branch's approaches to nuclear risk reduction, including whether or not to support future arms control.

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