

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Nuclear Blackmail and Nuclear Balance in the Baltic Region

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Questions about the nuclear balance have resurfaced in Europe after a long hiatus. NATO members in the Baltic region especially worry that Russia might use nuclear weapons to gain a strategic advantage at their expense. I draw on the political science literature on nuclear coercion to investigate whether Russia can successfully use nuclear coercion. I argue that NATO defense planners have more cause for optimism than they might realize. First, Russia will continue to suffer an unfavorable nuclear balance at the strategic level and so will never fully be confident that it can escape unacceptable costs meted out by the United States. Second, although their record of behavior suggests that Russian leaders might believe that nuclear weapons are useful for compellence, an alternative explanation is possible. That is, they may simply be compensating for their own relative inferiority with bluster. Third, nuclear coercion is only effective under very stringent circumstances: when the user is facing a large-scale conventional military attack that it cannot handle. Far from being cowed, NATO members located in the Baltic region are responding to Russia's nuclear saber rattling with efforts to bolster their defense and deterrence measures.

Keywords: A2/AD; nuclear coercion; NATO; Baltic security

The nuclear balance of power seems to matter once again in Europe. After two decades of dwindling nuclear weapons stockpiles on the continent and great power arms control agreements, several North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) members worry that they now need to reckon with the nuclear dilemmas that used to be salient during the Cold War. Those dilemmas remain intractable even with the benefit of hindsight and access to primary documents from that era. We would never know whether American decision-makers would *really* sacrifice New York City to save Paris, much less Warsaw in the present day. Nor do we know how to strike the appropriate balance between making extended nuclear deterrence commitments to allies and providing assurances to adversaries who might fear a nuclear attack themselves. After all, improving a commitment to an ally could sometimes make an adversary feel more insecure, thereby leading to a spiral that all would prefer to avoid. Even the value of alliances in the nuclear age remains murkier than we would like to believe. If great powers derive their ultimate security from having a survivable nuclear arsenal capable of issuing a retaliatory strike, then how can allies enhance security when, theoretically at least, the condition of mutually assured destruction (MAD) renders them less important? Put simply, tough times appear to lie ahead for those NATO members – specifically, Poland and the three Baltic countries of Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania – that may be most sensitive to unfavorable developments in the overall nuclear balance (Luik & Jermalavičius 2017; Veebel 2018).

Developing reliable answers or solutions to these challenges is probably an impossible undertaking, and so the goal of this essay is much more modest: to understand the extent to which developments in the nuclear balance might affect local perceptions and behaviors. The standard story these days emphasizes how Russia has a war-winning nuclear doctrine backed up by a relatively robust non-strategic, low-yield nuclear weapons arsenal that it can use to its advantage in northeastern Europe (Durkalec & Kroenig 2016; Kroenig 2015). The United States might have an impressive strategic nuclear weapons arsenal, this story goes, but it has let some of its Cold War advantages in the nuclear domain atrophy in the last two decades. The result is that local allies are vulnerable to Russian nuclear blackmail and coercion, a problem compounded by how

the United States might not have sufficient 'skin in the game' to defend them. Because Russia's local military advantage covers various rungs on the so-called escalation ladder, allies on NATO's northeastern flank fear that they could be isolated and picked off.

Some pundits and journalists have highlighted the reasonability of these fears. Bob Woodward writes that Russia has threatened the Trump administration with the use of tactical nuclear weapons in some Baltic contingency (Woodward 2018: 132). Malcolm Davis (2017) warns that although NATO sees nuclear weapons primarily for their deterrent value, Russia believes it can derive greater operational flexibility it can exploit in local crises. In light of these concerns, the Trump administration has announced in its Nuclear Posture Review (NPR) the need to acquire weapons of lower yields in order to plug gaps in the nuclear deterrence posture of the United States. After all, the NPR assesses that

Russia's belief that limited nuclear first use, potentially including low-yield weapons, can provide such an advantage is based, in part, on 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. (Office of the Secretary of Defense 2018: xi–xii).

Interviews with military and government officials in Latvia and Estonia reveal that they are worried about how 'Russia could use the threat of tactical use of nuclear weapons as a component of hybrid warfare scenario against NATO's forces in the region' (Veebel 2018: 302).

Concerns about Russia's nuclear strategy have merit, but they may be exaggerated. If Cold War history offers any guidance, and if political science research yields some insights, then the prospects for Russia to undertake nuclear blackmail and coercion effectively are not as high as commonly asserted. First, Russia will continue to suffer an unfavorable nuclear balance at the strategic level. This inferiority will shape decision-making at lower levels of the escalation ladder because the Kremlin will never fully be confident that it can escape unacceptable costs meted out by the United States. Second, although their record of behavior suggests that Russian leaders might have erroneous beliefs about how nuclear weapons may be useful for compellence, an alternative explanation is possible. Specifically, they may be compensating for their own weaknesses with bluster. Third, nuclear coercion is only effective under very stringent circumstances – that is, when the user is facing a large-scale conventional military attack that it cannot handle. Indeed, the evidence shows that, far from being cowed, NATO members located in the Baltic region are responding to Russia's nuclear saber rattling with efforts to bolster their defense and deterrence measures.

This essay proceeds as follows. I first discuss the political science literature on whether nuclear weapons have political effects beyond deterrence. I then describe the security environment that abounds today in the Baltic region, before I proceed to address whether nuclear blackmail will work against potentially vulnerable NATO members on the alliance's northeastern flank.

What We Know About the Political Effects of Nuclear Weapons

How nuclear weapons affect international politics is the subject of massive debate amongst practitioners and academics. The intuitive view holds that the advent of nuclear weapons was a decisive break from the past, with strategist Bernard Brodie (1946: 76) famously proclaiming that 'thus far the chief purpose of our military establishment has been to win wars', but '[f]rom now on its chief purpose must be to avert them'. Robert Jervis (1989: 1–45) offers the best theoretical exposition on how nuclear weapons revolutionized international politics. Once nuclear-armed states develop survivable, second-strike capabilities and face MAD, the impact of international anarchy – that is, the absence of a central government in world politics – attenuates considerably between them. Military victory, and for that matter bargaining leverage, is no longer derived from inflicting more pain on the adversary. States can now impose lots of pain on each other in a very short amount of time without first needing to win on the battlefield. Whereas wars used to be contests of strength, crises have become contests of nerves and of risk-taking. Several implications follow. Assuming that both sides are rational and have complete control over their nuclear arsenals, states with second-strike capabilities have greater incentives to cooperate with one another, thereby restraining hostilities and minimizing the likelihood of dangerous miscalculations and misperceptions. Relative gains matter less. Because great powers are assured of their vital interests thanks to their survivable second-strike capabilities, alliances are also less important. In the pre-nuclear era, by contrast, alignments affected the balance of power, which in turn influenced a great power's sense of its security and positioning in the international system.

The notion that MAD has revolutionized international politics has its critics. Some dispute the hypothesis that nuclear weapons have zero compellent value under MAD. Matthew Kroenig (2013) argues that nuclear

superiority – measured by having more nuclear weapons over an adversary – confers a bargaining advantage in nuclear crises (for a critique, see Sechser & Fuhrmann 2013). In his view, developing more nuclear weapons reflects an acceptance of greater risks. Others have argued that nuclear weapons provide leverage because the fear of punishment leads targets to back down (Beardsley & Asal 2009: 297; Thayer & Skyppek 2013: 43). Austin Long and Brendan Rittenhouse Green (2015) show that the United States mounted a far more effective campaign against Soviet nuclear-armed submarines in the Cold War than previously assumed. Had it not been for the Walker Spy Ring, which compromised key advantages that the United States had in covert submarine operations in the 1970s, the United States might have been able to negate the Soviet Union's ability to assure itself of a second strike via the sea leg of its nuclear deterrent (Coté Jr. 2003: 72–74). A more fundamental critique leveled at the nuclear revolution argument is that traditional power politics still characterizes great power relations in the nuclear era. U.S. investments in counterforce – weapons intended to target the military and nuclear assets of an adversary – and the persistence of alliance commitments indicate that states did believe they had incentives to compete rather than to cooperate (Lieber 2005: 123–148; Lieber & Press 2017).

Has there really been a nuclear revolution? The most intellectually honest answer recognizes the uncertainty involved with measuring the effects of nuclear weapons. Something must have changed in 1945 when nuclear weapons detonated over Hiroshima and Nagasaki, but the precise nature of that change is hard to pin down. Statistical analyses depend on questionable coding decisions. Measurement errors are unavoidable when operationalizing key concepts in international relations. Case studies will always be incomplete because documents that purport to illuminate complicated decision-making processes and leaders' beliefs will never be entirely conclusive (H-Diplo/ISSF 2014). Still, what does emerge in the recent international relations scholarship on nuclear weapons is that leaders vary in their beliefs about nuclear weapons. For example, President Richard Nixon bemoaned the loss of nuclear superiority (Gavin 2012: 110), whereas Soviet leaders were privately alarmed by U.S. investments in counterforce capabilities (Green & Long 2017). Certain policy-makers at least do not believe that MAD – once it obtains in international politics – is irreversible. Some states even vary in how they array their nuclear forces and craft their doctrines. In other words, states do not believe in the approach to nuclear strategy advocated in Jervis' account (Narang 2014; see also Gavin 2018). This is not to say that Jervis is ultimately wrong in his conclusions regarding nuclear weapons. Rather, states do not necessarily conform to the logic of his arguments. Jervis (1984) acknowledged as much by entitling a book *The illogic of American nuclear strategy*.

This grand theoretical debate aside, scholars have analyzed whether nuclear-armed powers can leverage their arsenals to achieve coercive success. Richard Betts surveys how states have resorted to nuclear blackmail, defined as 'coercion by the threat of punishment, a threat designed either to deter or to compel action by the opponent' (Betts 1987: 4). He finds that even when the United States had nuclear superiority over the Soviet Union, its leaders were not confident of U.S. invulnerability to a nuclear response. They might have issued coercive nuclear threats, but oftentimes these threats were made without a clear notion of the consequences if bluffs were called. Interestingly, the United States issued nuclear threats more than its Soviet rival, but the threats were neither 'blatant' nor 'easy to dismiss' (Betts 1987: 6–9). Did such threats succeed? Betts finds that 'there is more reason to believe that American threats impressed the communists than that Soviet threats impressed the U.S. leaders'. Though he later acknowledges that the evidence is ambiguous and open to multiple interpretations, he cautiously writes that 'attempts to exploit nuclear leverage in the past seem useful at best and not costly at worst, unless a country is operating from the inferior position' (Betts 1987: 214, 218). Kroenig's (2013) analysis is unequivocal in arguing that nuclear weapons are useful for compellence, but his statistical analysis measures the nuclear balance in terms of the numbers of nuclear weapons rather than the quality thereof. He concludes that the Soviet Union had more bargaining leverage in the second half of the Cold War when in fact its leaders worried about NATO's growing technological edge (Green & Long 2017).

Todd Sechser and Matthew Fuhrmann (2017: 12–14) give three reasons for being skeptical about the coercive value of nuclear weapons. First, nuclear weapons have little – if any – military value. Since conventional military power often suffices for seizing or destroying the object under dispute, nuclear weapons are superfluous. Second, even for those cases in which nuclear weapons have military use (e.g. destroying hardened targets), the threat to use nuclear weapons lacks credibility because executing it would be very costly for the state making it. Not only would nuclear weapons use generate massive international opprobrium, it would also set in motion retaliatory measures that the state executing the threat would prefer to avoid. Third, the threat to use nuclear weapons is most credible under highly restrictive conditions: namely, when the survival of the state is at stake. Nuclear blackmail may thus be effective when the state could not

succeed in a military campaign using conventional military power. Alternatively, nuclear blackmail might work when the state faces 'an extreme provocation' or a 'desperate situation with its back against the wall' (Sechser & Fuhrmann 2017: 15). In sum, nuclear weapons best serve extreme defensive purposes rather than offensive ones.¹

Despite these restrictive conditions, some might argue that alliances will be vulnerable to nuclear coercion. In the nuclear age, alliances arguably decline in value for those great powers that can ensure their own territorial integrity and political sovereignty with their survivable second-strike capabilities (Jervis 1989: 37). Moreover, extended nuclear deterrence guarantees – that is, the promise that the great power will use its nuclear arsenal to defend its ally from attack – are fundamentally unreliable. Rationally, the guarantor will prefer not to sacrifice its own cities to defend those of its allies. A bad deal with the adversary that comes at the expense of an ally is better than all-out nuclear war. Compounding this concern is the so-called stability-instability paradox, which refers 'to the extent that the military balance is stable at the level of all-out nuclear war, it will become less stable at lower levels of violence' (Jervis 1984: 31). An adversary could feel emboldened to aggress against the ally if it is confident that a great power will not risk a calamitous major war to protect its beleaguered partner. Some studies purport to uncover evidence for the stability-instability paradox (Rauchhaus 2009). Yet Bell and Miller (2015: 83) find that pairs of states in which both have nuclear weapons do not fight fewer wars than other pairs. They also find that asymmetric pairs of states (in which one state has nuclear weapons but not the other) will exhibit more low-level conflict, but only if no prior conflict existed between them (Bell & Miller 2015: 84). Sechser and Fuhrmann (2017: 250) are similarly unconvinced that the nuclear-armed states can undertake *faits accomplis* at lower levels of violence thanks to their nuclear arsenals.

Major debates about nuclear weapons appear to lack resolution. To begin with, a compelling case exists of nuclear weapons having a revolutionary impact in international politics once countries acquire survivable second-strike capabilities. And yet states seem to engage in traditional power politics all the same, maintaining their alliances and investing in counterforce capabilities in potential bids to escape the condition of MAD. Some allege that nuclear weapons confer bargaining leverage, whereas others are skeptical of such a proposition. Still, several seemingly contrary positions may be reconciled. First, just because leaders might try to escape MAD does not mean that they would succeed or that they are confident that they can escape unacceptable costs meted out by an adversary. As Betts' own research indicates, leaders issuing nuclear threats were never confident as to their own country's invulnerability. Second, leaders might have erroneous beliefs, leading them to think that nuclear coercion works, when it really does not. Motivated reasoning may be at play: Leaders cling to their beliefs about nuclear coercion and cherry pick data to support those beliefs, ignoring any evidence that should lead them to revise their views. The ambiguity surrounding certain historical cases encourages such biases since leaders can usually find historical analogies to support their beliefs. Third, coercive nuclear threats can be effective, but only under very narrow circumstances such as when the state making them faces existential risk. The next section applies these three observations to understand whether Russia could or would use nuclear coercion in the Baltic region.

The Contemporary Military Situation in the Baltic Region

Before we can assess how these observations would apply to northeastern Europe, we must understand the peculiarities of its security environment. The local balance of power heavily favors Russia. It has a lot of conventional military power that it can bring to bear in the Baltic region.² For one, its air forces would quickly gain air superiority over the three Baltic countries due to the latter's near lack of air power. Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania depend on NATO's Baltic Air Policing Mission to defend their airspace, but this alliance force typically comprises two rotational detachments from NATO allies of about four aircraft each. For another, Russia has militarized the exclave Kaliningrad in order to erect what security experts call an 'anti-access/area denial' (A2AD) bubble in the region. That is, in a hostile and kinetic military environment, Russia can complicate efforts by NATO to move around the theater-of-operations, let alone enter it in order to resupply and to reinforce local forces (Frühling & Lasconjarias 2016; Simón 2014). One RAND report contends that Russia could reach Tallinn and Riga within several days given the alliance's military posture that was in place in 2016 (Shlapak & Johnson 2016). Worsening the problem is that – unlike Poland – the three Baltic countries can be blockaded and cut off from the sea by the Russian Baltic Fleet.

¹ For a review that applies these insights to Russia's nuclear threats, see Nuclear coercion skepticism and Russia's nuclear-tinged threats. (2017). *The Nonproliferation Review*, 24(3–4), 379–383. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1080/10736700.2018.1431178>.

² On Russian military modernization since 2008, see Renz (2016).

Disparities between Poland and its Baltic neighbors in their size and capabilities mean that they have different optimal strategies for confronting the Russian military threat. Lithuania has by far the largest military of the Baltic countries, but none of the Baltic countries can beat Russia in set piece battles, whether individually or collectively. Moreover, any investments in weapons platforms appropriate for large-scale conventional missions would be expensive, ill-suited, and even redundant from a larger alliance perspective. Preparing to wage guerrilla warfare instead might help those countries make occupation so costly and difficult for Russia that it would not consider invading, assuming it has such intentions (Lanoszka & Hunzeker 2016). Thanks to its territorial depth and the size of its military, Poland stands to be most able to defeat a Russian conventional attack. However, its own military has until recently not seen investments and procurements appropriate for territorial defense (Paszewski 2016).

Aggravating this military asymmetry is Russia's nuclear arsenal. Russia reduced the size of the nuclear weapons arsenal that it inherited following the collapse of the Soviet Union. In 1986, when the two great powers were at nuclear parity, the Soviet Union purportedly had 40,000 nuclear weapons in its arsenal, with less than half of them being tactical nuclear weapons (Kristensen & Norris 2013: 78). These lofty numbers meant massive drops in the post-Cold War period. As Keir Lieber and Daryl Press (2006: 45) observed in 2006, 'Russia has 39 percent fewer long-range bombers, 58 percent fewer ICBMs [intercontinental ballistic missiles], and 80 percent fewer SSBNs [nuclear-powered ballistic missile submarines] than the Soviet Union fielded during its last days'. This deterioration was not just quantitative. Lieber and Press add that much of the remnant nuclear forces had low readiness, leading them to conclude controversially that Washington might even have had nuclear superiority over Moscow. This sorry state of affairs did not endure. Russia began a modernization program of its nuclear forces in the late 1990s that has sought to replace Soviet era systems with newer ones, thereby assuring itself of the survivability of its arsenal lest the United States launches a significant nuclear attack (Colby 2016: 2). Specifically, this modernization program entails new ICBMs like the RS-28 Sarmat as well as improvements of the strategic submarine force with the introduction of the new Borei-class submarines and their submarine-launched ballistic missiles (SLBMs), the RSM-56 Bulava. Russian heavy bombers are seeing upgrades, usually in the form of modernizing current ones like the Tu-160. This modernization program is unfolding against the backdrop of various U.S.-Russia arms control initiatives. The most notable of which is the New START (Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty), which became effective in 2010 and limits the number of deployed strategic warheads to 1,550. Hans Kristensen (2017) asserts that modernization should not be equated with a nuclear build-up.³ Indeed, he and Robert Norris (2017: 115) observe that Russia has so far adhered to its pledge of remaining below the New START limit. Russia's compliance with other arms control treaties like the now moribund Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty – which bans conventional and nuclear launchers and ballistic missiles with ranges of 500–1,000 kilometers (sea-launched missiles excluded) – is debatable (Kühn & Péczeli 2017).

Significant controversy surrounds Russia's nonstrategic nuclear weapons.⁴ Russia may be adhering to its international commitments with regard to strategic nuclear weapons, but it has an immense local advantage with its nonstrategic or tactical nuclear weapons. Jacek Durkalec and Matthew Kroenig (2016: 39) describe the 2,000 or so nonstrategic weapons in Russia's arsenal as including 'nuclear-armed torpedoes, depth charges, short-range surface-to-surface missiles, air-to-surface missiles and bombs, and surface-to-air missiles for use in air defence'. A major reason why this arsenal provokes so much anxiety is the belief that Russia has a doctrine that emphasizes their early use in a conflict with NATO. As the Trump administration's 2018 Nuclear Posture Review observes, 'even more troubling [than Russia's retention and modernization of nonstrategic nuclear weapons] has been Russia's adoption of military strategies and capabilities that rely on nuclear escalation for their success' (Office for the Secretary of Defense 2018: i). The concern is that Russia has a nuclear doctrine that envisions nuclear escalation for the ultimate purpose of de-escalating a conflict on terms favorable to it (Colby 2016: 5). Aggravating these concerns is the rhetoric of Russian leaders. For example, the Russian ambassador to Denmark warned in March 2015 that '[i]f Denmark joins the American-led missile defense shield, [...] the Danish warships will be targets for Russian nuclear missiles' (quoted in Durkalec and Kroenig 2016: 39).

What is the basis of the view that Russia adopted such a nuclear doctrine? Admittedly, it is not as strong as the foregoing accounts suggest. Sokov (2014) describes the concept of de-escalation as 'the idea that,

³ Military modernization may not be a build-up, but it can still provoke reasonable insecurity because of the security dilemma.

⁴ To be sure, any nuclear weapons use would have strategic effects. Major international repercussions would follow the detonation of a tactical or low-yield nuclear weapon.

if Russia were faced with a large-scale conventional attack that exceeded its capacity for defense, it might respond with a limited nuclear strike'. He adds that 'such a threat [of a limited nuclear strike] is envisioned as deterring the United States and its allies from involvement in conflicts in which Russia has an important stake, and in this sense is essentially defensive'. Sokov clarifies that whereas the 2000 military doctrine permitted their use 'in situations critical to [Russian] national security', the newer 2010 military doctrine narrows their use to those situations in which 'the very existence of the state is under threat'. The Russian 2014 military doctrine echoes this view, stating that Russia

shall reserve for itself the right to employ nuclear weapons in response to the use against it and/or its allies of nuclear and other kinds of weapons of mass destruction, as well as in the case of aggression against the Russian Federation with use of conventional weapons when the state's very existence has been threatened. (Quoted in Kristensen & Norris 2017: 117).

Any strategist ignorant of Russia might conclude that the nuclear doctrine is less sinister than commonly argued, since the notion of escalating to de-escalate does not seem applicable to scenarios in which Russia undertakes aggressive action against a NATO member.

On the basis of stated doctrine alone, Russia does not envision using a limited nuclear strike to deter a strong alliance response.⁵ To the contrary, its doctrine is somewhat redolent of the doctrine of flexible response that NATO embraced – at least rhetorically – in the 1960s (Gavin 2001). Flexible response was a defensive doctrine centered on controlling nuclear escalation in a bid to exploit newly available military options across different levels of violence. The benefit was that militarized conflict would not automatically reach the strategic nuclear level. At the time it aspired to be a more credible deterrent policy than Massive Retaliation, which had called for a large-scale nuclear response in the event of some ill-defined form of Soviet aggression. The nuclear de-escalation concept operates similarly, especially since the declared situations that call for nuclear weapons use have become more restrictive as Russia improves its conventional military forces. Indeed, why would Russia refrain from using its nuclear arsenal if it came under a conventional attack – by a nuclear-armed great power, no less – that it could not handle?⁶ Some might argue that, in terms of its nuclear posture, Russia could be the Pakistan of Europe if it really has what Vipin Narang (2014: 19) calls an asymmetric escalation posture – that is, a posture 'explicitly designed to deter conventional attacks by enabling a state to respond with rapid, asymmetric escalation to first use of nuclear weapons against military and/or civilian targets'. Russia fits the bill since it faces a gross conventional asymmetry relative to NATO. As Narang further writes (2014: 8), this posture can 'enable a revisionist state to aggress at low levels against an opponent and use the posture as a shield behind which to achieve those objectives'. Nevertheless, some observers allege that Russia has expanded its options to achieve strategic deterrence using improved conventional forces and non-traditional tools of statecraft (Ven Bruusgaard 2016). Whether strategic deterrence forms a coherent part of Russian official doctrine and statecraft or not, Russia has not lowered its threshold for nuclear weapons use.

Two counterarguments are possible. The first is that such nuances might not matter if Russia sees the Baltic region as falling under its sphere of influence. Accordingly, Russia will always believe that it is acting defensively to protect vital interests, which are self-servingly described to be broad enough that they impinge upon the territorial integrity and sovereignty of NATO's Baltic members. If this argument is correct, then the fundamental problem is Russian revanchism, not its nuclear doctrine per se. France had an asymmetrical escalation posture in the Cold War, but it did not use this posture to challenge its neighbors (Narang 2014: 153–178). Even in a world without nuclear weapons, a large-scale Russian assault in northeastern Europe might mean that some NATO members would want to cede victory to Moscow early in a Baltic war rather than incur the costs of fighting. Alternatively, as Great Britain and France did in September 1939 when Nazi Germany invaded Poland, they might declare war, but do little about it. Indeed, a limited nuclear strike by Russia might increase the odds of NATO intervention since the folk understanding of the 'de-escalation' concept assumes that Washington will be very impressed and cowed by a nuclear strike. Regardless, the 'de-escalation' concept makes a strange wager. The second counterargument is that because we are ultimately

⁵ For a similar critique, see Tertrais (2018). For another view, see Zysk (2018). Tertrais, B. (2018). Russia's nuclear policy: Worrying for the wrong reasons. *Survival*, 60(2), 33–44. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1080/00396338.2018.1448560>; and Zysk, K. (2018). Escalation and nuclear weapons in Russia's military strategy. *The RUSI Journal*, 163(2), 4–15. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1080/03071847.2018.1469267>.

⁶ I thank Michael Kofman for this point.

uncertain of how Russia might behave, we must still hedge against the possibility that it has a nuclear de-escalation doctrine. That may be so since we cannot rely on Russia to behave as we want it to behave. Still, the main issue facing the Baltic region at least is again not doctrine per se but potential revanchism.

Implications for Baltic Security

Given these parameters of the security environment in the Baltic region, what are the prospects of nuclear coercion? Recall the three points made earlier. First, escaping MAD is extremely difficult and costly. Even when the United States enjoyed nuclear superiority over the Soviet Union, its leaders did not believe that they were invulnerable to a devastating riposte. Second, leaders might still think that they can leverage coercive advantages from their nuclear weapons. Third, despite these beliefs, nuclear coercion does not have a good track record, with its effectiveness highest when the circumstances are defensive and extreme.

Can Russia Escape MAD?

Russia would face tremendous hurdles if it were to try to overcome MAD. To do so, its current modernization program would be inadequate since it would need to launch a bolt-from-the-blue first strike against all three legs of the U.S. nuclear triad. Specifically, Russia would have to enhance its submarine warfare capabilities significantly in order to track and to kill American (and British) nuclear-powered ballistic missile submarines that could launch SLBMs against Russian targets. It would need capabilities for destroying hardened ICBM sites located across the United States and striking airbases before nuclear-armed bombers can take off. It would also need to develop a sophisticated air defense system to destroy any incoming long-range, stand-off nuclear missiles that the United States is hoping to get for those bombers. In a strategic exchange, Russia must achieve all of these tasks before U.S. nuclear weapons rain down on Russian cities and military sites. Since the 1970s at least, the United States has been developing impressive counterforce capabilities due to improvements in remote sensing, guidance systems, data processing, communication, and other computing technologies (Lieber & Press 2017: 18–32). That Britain and France have their own nuclear arsenals also complicates Russian targeting.

Escaping MAD does not appear to be a goal behind the motivation of Russia's modernization program (Podvig 2018). To the contrary, Russian military strategists are acutely aware of their country's inferiority relative to the United States and NATO. As chief of the General Staff, Marshal Nikolai Ogarkov recognized in the early 1980s that a revolution in military affairs was afoot. Conventional weapons gained effectiveness thanks to advances in guidance systems and information processing. He and his colleagues began to appreciate that Warsaw Pact forces could soon lose their long-held advantages with regard to the conventional balance (Adamsky 2010: 28–32). The Cold War ended within a decade and Russia oversaw the rapid deterioration of its armed forces throughout the 1990s. The modernization programs overseen by Putin and his defense ministers have served to rectify the neglect during those years (Renz 2016). Nevertheless, Russian military theorists write extensively of the unfavorable strategic balance. Retired General Makhmut Gareev (2016), current Chief of the General Staff Valery Gerasimov (2014), S. G. Chekinov, and S. A. Bogdanov (2011), and current Commander of the Western Military District A. V. Kartapolov (2015) have all opined how Russia has lagged behind the United States and the West in its ability to fight non-traditional wars – that is, wars in which information and proxy conflicts play major roles.

Do Russian Leaders Think They Can Get Coercive Leverage with Nuclear Weapons?

Russian leaders might still reason that escaping MAD is unnecessary for undertaking nuclear coercion against certain states, especially those located on NATO's northeastern flank. Whether they hold such beliefs is almost impossible to discern without access to memoranda of conversations and other documents that can provide insights into high-level decision-making, let alone their inner thoughts. Of course, the record of recent Russian behavior suggests that its leaders believe that nuclear weapons do provide leverage. Russia conducted an ICBM test in spring 2014 while tensions were still running high over its annexation of Crimea (Gutterman & Stewart 2014). Durkalec (2015, 9–11) argues that the Kremlin engaged in nuclear messaging during the crisis, with increased bomber activity in the Baltic region and some political leaders and public commentators even making provocative statements in support of nuclear use against NATO (see Durkalec 2015). In late 2016, Russia deployed nuclear-capable (but not necessarily nuclear-armed) Iskander-M missiles to Kaliningrad on the same weekend when Lithuania was holding parliamentary elections (DELFI 2016). More recently, Putin used his State of the Union speech on March 1, 2018 to discuss advances in Russian military technology. One highlight was a nuclear-powered cruise missile supposedly capable of delivering a nuclear payload against targets located anywhere in the world ('Vladimir Putin: Russia boasts' 2018).

Yet another explanation can illuminate these behaviors: Russia is using its nuclear bluster to compensate for its perceived weaknesses in the conventional domain. Though Russia benefits from a very favorable local military balance in the Baltic region, it lacks escalation dominance vis-à-vis NATO as a whole. Russia is not a paper tiger, but reminding other states of its nuclear capabilities helps improve deterrence. Consider, for example, Kaliningrad and the possible deployment of Iskander missiles there. As discussed above, analysts often describe the exclave as the basis for a Russian A2AD bubble in the Baltic region. However, as Sergey Sukhankin writes, '[t]he apparent [October 2016] deployment of Iskander ballistic missiles to Kaliningrad actually suggests that Moscow has exhausted all the others means of effectively withstanding the political, economic and cultural competition with other regional players' (2016: para. 11). Kaliningrad is as much of a liability for Russia as it is an asset. It can be cut off or held at risk in case hostilities between Russia and NATO escalate. Nuclear bluster helps to make the exclave seem impregnable.

Would Nuclear Coercion Be Effective Against the Baltic Countries and NATO?

Russian attempts at nuclear blackmail will likely be ineffective. First, as many analysts point out, Russia does not need to use nuclear weapons in order to conquer the Baltics. The force ratios already heavily favor it, even with NATO's enhanced Forward Presence being regionally deployed since 2017 (Lanoszka & Hunzeker 2019; Shlapak & Johnson 2016). Second, threats to use nuclear weapons lack believability. Not only would it deepen Russia's isolated international status, it would also most likely precipitate the very thing that Russia would prefer to avoid: greater involvement by the United States. Why would it risk its own complete destruction for the sake of taking three Baltic countries, especially when Kaliningrad already gives it access to the Baltic Sea? Third, a sudden move against the Baltic countries would be offensive in nature. It would not involve Russia having its back up against the wall. If the United States were to attack Russia, then nuclear weapons use could be expected. As stated earlier, Russia would be peculiar if it allowed hostile forces to attack it successfully using conventional military weapons.

A bigger worry is the stability-instability paradox whereby Russia might undertake lower forms of aggression against the Baltic countries in the belief that stability exists at the strategic level. This paradox is playing out already in the region. Yet the higher-op tempo of bomber activity since 2014 raises a question: Has such efforts been successful in extracting benefits from the Baltic countries and NATO? Put differently, if Russia has been engaging in nuclear coercion, then how has Russia benefited so far? Military spending in the region has never been higher, whereas NATO has adopted various defense and deterrence measures against Russia. Estonia and Lithuania still provide lethal aid and diplomatic support to Ukraine (Raś & Szeligowski 2018). Rather than cowing target audiences, nuclear bluster is galvanizing them to adopt defense policies that strengthen measures against Russia. And indeed, the annexation of Crimea has led the Baltic countries to attend to their vulnerabilities at the subconventional level. The national guards of Latvia and Estonia, for example, have undertaken exercises in which they attempt to retake sites from 'little green men' – paramilitary forces of unclear origin that may be working at the behest of Russia ('Latvian, Estonian national guards' 2015). Lithuania and Estonia already encourage members of their populations to take seriously the prospect – unlikely as it may be – of fighting insurgent warfare against a Russian occupation.

Perhaps the real goal – to take the word of the Kremlin – is to deter NATO offensive action or expansion. After all, Russian military theorists and strategists have expressed an awareness of their country's relative strategic inferiority. If Ukraine were to join NATO or to receive a massive shipment of lethal arms from the United States, then Russia's sense of insecurity might deepen. Display of nuclear military power may serve as a reminder of Russian military might, thereby lending credibility to how Russia sees Ukrainian membership in NATO as a red line. Of course, whether nuclear weapons are necessary for making such deterrent threats is questionable. The use of conventional force against Georgia in August 2008 presumably served to ensure that the Caucasian country would not join the alliance (see Lanoszka 2018). NATO is too internally divided for members to agree unanimously on extending membership to either Ukraine or Georgia. That said, NATO still provides support to those countries (North Atlantic Council 2018). The threat of a nuclear response is unnecessary for creating a lack of consensus among NATO members. As such, describing Russian (or any organization's) deterrence measures as successful may be prone to the same methodological errors that have generally attended deterrence scholarship. Deterrence only works if the target had a real interest in pursuing a course of action deemed undesirable. A counterfactual is implicit: In the case of Russian nuclear strategy, would NATO really undertake offensive actions against Russia if it were not for the latter's arsenal? Perhaps, but other factors beyond those identified by deterrence theory could be important in shaping these decision-making calculations (Lebow & Stein 1989: 211–212).

Conclusion

NATO defense planners have grown concerned about the impact of Russian nuclear weapons and doctrine on European security. Specifically, fears have arisen over how Russia might use its nuclear arsenal to undertake *faits accomplis* in the region, thereby using nuclear weapons for offensive rather than defensive purposes. These fears speak to a broader issue as to whether nuclear weapons are useful instruments for states in achieving coercive success against their targets.

These fears are natural to have, but the international relations scholarship that addresses these issues more broadly encourages some optimism. Despite the purported gaps in NATO's nuclear deterrence posture, Russia will face massive challenges in escaping MAD. Any move by Moscow to use nuclear weapons for strategic gain at the expense of a NATO member must consider the real risk of a devastating riposte by Washington. Of course, leaders might still think that they can accrue coercive advantages from their nuclear weapons. That is why Russian assertions about its nuclear deployments are disingenuous (see, e.g., 'Russia threatens no one' 2018). The Kremlin engages in such activities in the belief that it is deriving some benefit, not because these moves are innocuous. Yet nuclear coercion does not have a good track record. Its effectiveness appears to be greatest when the circumstances surrounding their possible use are defensive and extreme. In the context of the Baltic region, a hostile takeover would not necessarily be made more likely with Russian nuclear weapons. To the contrary, Russia may make a move against Poland and the three Baltic countries by exploiting its conventional military advantages rather than its nuclear ones. The problem would not be nuclear weapons per se, but its revisionist motives.

Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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