

Revised Russian Nuclear Doctrine: Implication and Options

Introduction

Russia-Ukraine conflict started in February 2022, and even after more than two and half years of conflict, there is no sign of agreement. The conflict had seen fluctuating consequences with the initial Ukrainian edge being overtaken by the Russians. The geopolitical alignments of the United States (US) and the West with Ukraine and the alleged support of supplying long-range missiles to Ukraine has further precipitated the already complex and tense situation. Russian President Vladimir Putin's plan to change the nuclear doctrine should be seen in this context.

The Document – Basic Principles of State Policy on Nuclear Deterrence

This document of 'Basic Principles of State Policy on Nuclear Deterrence' represents the official view. This is the basic document which highlights three main issues, namely – the essence of nuclear deterrence, conditions for the transition of the Russian Federation to the use of nuclear weapons, and the tasks and functions of federal government authorities, other government bodies and organisations for implementing state policy on nuclear deterrence. While discussing the first part that is nuclear deterrence, the Russians state that the implementation of nuclear deterrence will address the challenges from not only the hostile individual states, but also military coalitions (blocs, alliances) that possess nuclear weapons and/or other types of weapons of mass destruction or significant combat potential of general-purpose forces.^[1] This nuclear deterrence will be ensured by "combat-ready forces and means that are capable to inflict guaranteed unacceptable damage on a potential adversary through employment of nuclear weapons in any circumstances, as well as by the readiness and resolve of the Russian Federation to use such weapons".^[2] It also describes the military risks/threats, whereby, the deterrence may be challenged. The prominent threat includes "deployment by states which consider the Russian Federation as a potential adversary, of missile defence systems and means, medium- and shorter-range cruise and ballistic missiles, non-nuclear high-precision and hypersonic weapons, strike unmanned aerial vehicles, and directed energy weapons".^[3] However, when describing the conditionality for use of nuclear weapons, the document highlights that apart from an adversary's attack on critical governmental or military sites, the other condition will be if the adversary uses conventional weapon aggressively so that the very existence of the state is in jeopardy, then they will use the nuclear weapons.

Proposed Revised Document Highlights

As per the Russian News Agency Tass, various amendments have been made. Firstly, the list of countries and military alliances that are subject to nuclear deterrence has been broadened. Secondly, the entry points for threat scenario have also increased. However, the addition of caveat like "Aggression against Russia by a non-nuclear country, but with the participation or support of a nuclear country, was proposed to be viewed as their joint attack on Russia"^[4] is clearly an indicator of sending an overt message to the West to not to meddle in the conflict by supplying weapons, which might impact the Russian mainland. Further, it seems that the nuclear threshold has been lowered, as it now states that if the Russians get a "Reliable information about a massive take-off of strategic or tactical planes towards Russia, or the launch of cruise missiles, drones, hypersonic weapons towards its territory may be interpreted as a sufficient reason for a nuclear response by Moscow".^[5] Further, it also mentions the use of nuclear weapon if its ally Belarus is threatened. This may be due to the fact that Russian Tactical

Nuclear Weapons (TNWs) are placed in Belarus[6]. Russia had re-equipped 10 Belarusian Su-25 (Frogfoot) aircraft with the ability to deliver nuclear weapons and had transferred dual-capable, road-mobile 9K720 Iskander-M (SS-26) short-range ballistic missiles to Belarus[7].

Nuclear Inventory of Russia

As per SIPRI 2024, as of January 2024, the Russian Federation maintained a military stockpile of approximately 4,380 nuclear warheads of which about 2,822 were strategic warheads, of which roughly 1,710 were deployed on land and sea-based ballistic missiles and at bomber bases.[8] However, it is the 1,558 non-strategic TNWs which will be a cause of concern as this may be used against Ukraine. The Western logic of Russians amassing a large number of TNWs is to address their perceived conventional inferiority. Notwithstanding, the Russians clearly have the largest number of nuclear weapons globally as well as very diversified TNWs which can be delivered by missile, aircrafts, ships, and submarines.

Implications

Russian hawks have been professing to use the nuclear weapons to end the conflict and they also believe that the Russian threshold for nuclear escalation is high, and as a result the West is able to manoeuvre their designs. At a June forum in St. Petersburg, Kremlin-connected foreign policy expert Sergei Karaganov urged Putin to “Aim a nuclear pistol at our Western adversaries” to achieve victory in Ukraine.[9] However, President Putin had so far given mixed signals where on one side he says that there are no security threats which require nuclear retaliation, on the other hand he has amended the doctrine with clear nuclear signalling. As far as the conflict is concerned, though the Russians have been able to control the conflict but the Ukrainian attack on the Russian early warning radars may not be taken lightly. The attacks against the sites in Armavir and Orsk raised US fears that Russia could misinterpret the move as an attempt to weaken the early-warning capabilities of Russia’s strategic nuclear deterrent.[10] The changes in the doctrine hints to these incidences. The lowering of nuclear threshold also gives a signal to smaller nations in the European Union about the risks they are being subjected to by North Atlantic Treaty Organization and the US, as well as the possibility of Russia starting producing Intermediate Range Ballistic Missiles (IRBMs) which were prohibited earlier due to 1987 Intermediate-Range Nuclear Treaty. IRBMs will be potent missiles for further destabilising the strategic stability. Further, there are alleged news of Russian collaborating with the Chinese to develop long range drones – “EMZ Kupol, a subsidiary of Russian state-owned arms company Almaz-Antey, has developed and flight-tested a new drone model called Garpiya-3 (G3) in China with the help of local specialists”.[11] This G3 drone can travel about 2,000 km (1,200 miles) with a payload of 50 kg (110 pounds).[12] Whether these are speculations or authentic news that can only be ascertained with time, if it is true then it will be a big advantage for Russia as China till now has overtly remained neutral. If long range weapons are supplied and used by the Ukrainians to target critical Russian assets then the West is testing the patience of President Putin which may have devastating consequences.

Options

Lowering of nuclear threshold is not in the interest of any party. Both should take a step backwards and think of the best possible way to negotiate for settlement. Intervention by the US/West or China will only precipitate matters and bring both nations to the brink of a catastrophic war. Countries like India who have a good relationship with both countries have mediated in the past and in future too can provide space for a meaningful dialogue. Ukrainian

civilian causality as well as destruction of infrastructure has resulted in 6,154,000 refugees from Ukraine fleeing to Europe.^[13] The economy has adversely been impacted and the gross domestic productivity has fallen sharply. The total cost of reconstruction and recovery over the next decade will be USD 486 billion and this will increase as the conflict prolongs. It is high time that Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy thinks of some realistic options for negotiations. Similarly, in the long run, the Russian economy as well as social fabric will also get impacted. Therefore, it is in both countries' interest to come to a solution.

Conclusion

The revised nuclear doctrine clearly displays the Russian red lines. Lowering of nuclear threshold may accidentally or intentionally result in the use of nuclear weapons which will be a disaster. One needs to remember the horrific results of the two nuclear bombings in Japan. Therefore, it is essential for all the parties to have restraint and work for an amicable solution, because war is never a solution to any problem.

Endnotes

[1] Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, 'Basic Principles of State Policy of the Russian Federation on Nuclear Deterrence', The President of the Russian Federation Executive Order, 8 June 2020 10:31, at https://www.mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/international_safety/1434131/

[2] Ibid

[3] Ibid

[4] Russian News Agency Tass, IN BRIEF: Putin previews Russia's updated nuclear doctrine, 26, September 2024, at <https://tass.com/politics/1847759>

[5] Ibid

[6] Russian News Agency Tass, Russian nuclear weapons in Belarus in place, 'in good condition' — Lukashenko, 25 December 2023, at <https://tass.com/defense/1726371>

[7] '????????? ?????????? ?????? ?????? ??????????' [Interview with Vladimir Putin to Pavel Zarubin], Smotrim, 25 Mar. 2023. As quoted in SIPRI Yearbook 2024

[8] SIPRI Yearbook 2024, World Nuclear Forces 2023, at <https://www.sipri.org/sites/default/files/YB24%2007%20WNF.pdf>

[9] Where Putin stands on using nuclear weapons to win Russia's war in Ukraine, PBS News, Jul 6, 2024, at <https://www.pbs.org/newshour/world/where-putin-stands-on-using-nuclear-weapons-to-win-russias-war-in-ukraine>

[10] Xiaodon Liang, Ukraine Strikes Russian Early-Warning Radars, Arms Control Association, July/August 2024 at <https://www.armscontrol.org/act/2024-07/news/ukraine-strikes-russian-early-warning-radars>

[11] Reuters, Exclusive: Russia has secret war drones project in China, intel sources say, September 26, 2024 at <https://www.reuters.com/world/russia-has-secret-war-drones-project-china-intel-sources-say-2024-09-25/>

[12] Ibid

[13] Operational Data Portal, Ukrainian Refugee situation, <https://data.unhcr.org/en/situations/ukraine>

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