

# The Shooting Party

## *Russia's Evolving Threat Perceptions Since 2022*

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## Abstract

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In this paper, we examine how Russian military thinkers interpret and operationalize the threat perceptions defined by the country's political leadership. Despite nearly four years of war in Ukraine, Russian security concerns regarding US military capabilities remain largely unchanged. Russian military thinkers continue to perceive US ballistic missile defense and Prompt Global Strike programs as the main threats to Russia's security, believing these programs to be designed to degrade Russia's retaliatory strike capabilities. The war in Ukraine has exposed gaps in Russia's military capabilities, heightening Russian anxiety about the military contingents from the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) in the Baltic and Black Seas, particularly potential US deployments to Finland and Sweden. Viewing the substantial US and NATO military assistance to Ukraine as part of a broader strategy to weaken Russia, Russian military thinkers are particularly alarmed by Ukrainian offensive operations within Russian borders or those that target mainland Russia. Russian military thinkers believe that the United States and NATO are preparing for a long-term confrontation with Russia, which reinforces their views on the importance of maintaining and enhancing Russia's strategic deterrence capabilities.

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## Executive Summary

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Although Russian operations in Ukraine reveal a degree of adaptability, the war has not reshaped Russia's broader framework of threat perceptions.<sup>1</sup> Rather than introducing fundamentally new assessments, current military discourse tends to reinterpret established concerns through the lens of ongoing conflict. In effect, Russia's experience in Ukraine has not altered Russia's security anxieties but has instead amplified and reinforced them.

The war on Ukraine has not led to new perspectives among Russian military thinkers on threat perceptions for multiple reasons. First, Russia's understanding of internal and external threats and dangers to its security has not changed. Second, given the attrition of its military in Ukraine, Russian theorists perceive Russia to be even more disadvantaged than before in terms of the conventional military balance vis-à-vis the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). Third, Russian military thinkers do not appear to have changed their assumptions about what a NATO-Russia conflict would look like. Discussions among Russian military thinkers about significant threats from the US and NATO are still linked primarily to the scenario of a massive aerospace attack during the initial period of war. According to them, the main mitigation proposed to counter these capabilities is that Russia should continue to invest in asymmetric capabilities.

This report concludes that Russian military leaders remain chiefly preoccupied with two long-standing US programs that have shaped their strategic planning for years. The first is the development of Prompt Global Strike (PGS), designed to enable the United States to deliver precision conventional strikes anywhere in the world within an hour, without reliance on forward-deployed forces. Russian strategists continue to fear that such a capability could neutralize both their offensive and defensive strategic deterrent forces before they could be employed during the initial period of war. This concern is embedded in the broader scenario of a massed aerospace attack, a staple of Soviet military thinking, in which the US conducts massed decapitation strikes against national command-and-control systems and the strategic nuclear force, executed through both group and individual tactical-level strikes. The proposed Russian response remains focused on escalation control and decisive action to inflict "unacceptable damage" on an adversary.

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<sup>1</sup> The title of this paper is a reference to Anton Chekhov's "The Shooting Party."

The second focus of concern is the development of US ballistic missile defense (BMD) capability, particularly the Golden Dome project, a multilayered national defense system that combines current US missile defense programs intended to counter missile threats. Even though many observers doubt that the project can be implemented as envisioned, for now, Russian military-analytical thinking about Golden Dome remains consistent with previous assumptions about the development of US BMD capabilities. In response, many argue for sustained investment in offensive strategic systems capable of overcoming or saturating US missile defenses. Others pose that Moscow should bolster its own missile defense capabilities.

Space threats are also significant for Russian military thinkers, who emphasize the importance of maintaining access to space-based military information while denying it to adversaries. The participation of Western commercial space firms in supporting Ukraine has reinforced Russian fears about the role of space in modern warfare. To address these challenges, Russian military thinkers advocate for developing space systems that ensure the effective use of nuclear weapons and troop formations, establishing rapid-response orbital launch capabilities, and leveraging space assets to support ground and naval forces.

Although Russia's security concerns about US military capabilities remain consistent, it now extends these anxieties to the prospect of US deployments in Finland and Sweden, which has further intensified and magnified their earlier apprehensions. Secondary concerns include the possible proliferation of US strike capabilities in eastern Europe, as these capabilities could affect Russia's military assets in the Leningrad military district. Russian military thinkers believe that Finland and Sweden's entry into NATO bolsters NATO's capacity and creates new challenges for Russia's force planning.

Russian military thinkers interpret the substantial military assistance provided to Ukraine by the US and its allies as a broader Western strategy aimed at weakening Russia. They view the supply of long-range strike weapons as a signal that the West is increasingly willing to risk direct confrontation with Russia. Even so, the Russian military does not appear to believe that these capabilities are infallible. Instead, military thinkers reflect the symbolic importance of US strike assets in what Russia considers to be its near abroad as they stress the risks of escalation between the US and Russia. Parallel to concerns over Western strike systems, Russian strategists are increasingly alarmed by the expanding offensive capabilities of Ukraine itself. They are especially concerned by Ukraine's expanding ability to carry out offensive operations within Russian borders. In their view, Ukraine increasingly serves as a forward base for potential Western attacks against Russia.

In Russian military thought, Western policies are interpreted as evidence of an emerging long-term standoff with Russia. Despite its own nuclear rhetoric and violations of arms control agreements, Moscow remains deeply concerned about the weakening of the nuclear taboo and the possible deployment of intermediate-range nuclear forces in Europe. Russian military

thinkers are worried about the potential increase in the US nuclear arsenal. This belief has reinforced their views on which NATO activities constitute a threat to Russia's security and underscored the importance of maintaining and enhancing Russia's strategic deterrence capabilities.

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## Introduction

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Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine on February 24, 2022, accomplished what decades of diplomacy and debate could not. It united the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and the European Union (EU) around a shared conclusion: Moscow is a real and present threat to European security. The war galvanized support for Ukraine and shattered long-standing military nonalignment, prompting Finland and Sweden to join NATO. The two new members want to ensure that Moscow recognizes that attacks on their territories would come with terrible repercussions and that Russia would be unsuccessful. From Moscow's perspective, these same capabilities are evidence of plans against its own territory.

Too often, discussions about Russian threat perceptions among national security scholars are limited to broad categories of capabilities.<sup>2</sup> Most discussions about Russian threat perceptions center on debating the credibility of threats to Russia posed by NATO. Russian leadership tells a different story. In early 2023, the Kremlin's new "foreign policy concept" named Washington and its allies as its main adversary.<sup>3</sup> The document accused the West of unleashing a "hybrid war" on Russia aimed at weakening it in every way. Regardless of the truth of the matter, official Russian threat perceptions serve as the main driver for Russian military planning. To better understand this key issue, this report examines the perspectives of Russian military thinkers and how they operationalize the concept of threat that is laid out by the country's political leadership.

This report seeks to fill a gap in understanding of Russian threat perceptions by focusing on perceived military threats by Russian military thinkers across the Russian Armed Forces following its full-scale invasion of Ukraine. It also sheds light on relevant discussions about evolving military threats (and dangers) to Russian security. There is limited systematic research regarding military threat perceptions and the impact of Moscow's military experience in Ukraine. Moreover, this report explores several key writings during the past three years within the pages of Russian defense periodicals. It argues that although Russian forces have

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<sup>2</sup> Wolfgang Zellner et al., *Threat Perceptions in the OSCE Area*, OSCE Network, 2014, [https://osce-network.net/fileadmin/user\\_upload/publications/Threat\\_Perceptions\\_in\\_the\\_OSCE\\_Area.pdf](https://osce-network.net/fileadmin/user_upload/publications/Threat_Perceptions_in_the_OSCE_Area.pdf); Nathalie Tocci, "The Paradox of Europe's Defense Moment," *Texas National Security Review* (2022/2023), <https://tnsr.org/2023/01/the-paradox-of-europes-defense-moment/>; Dima Adamsky, *The Russian Way of Deterrence: Strategic Culture, Coercion, and War* (Stanford University Press, 2023).

<sup>3</sup> President of the Russian Federation, *The Concept of the Foreign Policy of the Russian Federation*, 2023, [https://www.mid.ru/en/foreign\\_policy/fundamental\\_documents/1860586/](https://www.mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/fundamental_documents/1860586/).

demonstrated operational adaptability in Ukraine, the conflict has not produced fundamentally new perspectives on Russian threat perceptions. Although some military analysts highlight fresh dimensions of long-standing concerns, these discussions largely build on earlier anxieties. Nevertheless, Russia's military experience in Ukraine has reinforced and heightened its preexisting fears.

The report begins with a discussion about the evolving concepts of "military threats" and "military dangers," as Moscow's 2014 military doctrine divides threats into these two categories. The second section focuses on select authoritative Russian-language military articles between 2022 and 2025 and describes how the Russian military views threats. This section also delves into the mitigations proposed by Russian military thinkers to counter the perceived threats. The conclusion offers some implications for the US and its allies.

This study can help researchers and practitioners alike understand how Russia's military experience in Ukraine has affected the military's threat perceptions. This report sheds light on the programs and activities that may shape those perceptions. National security scholars will be interested in the proposals from Russian military leaders when it comes to possible mitigations, whereas arms control scholars will find the content of this report useful because it provides an overview of the specific capabilities the Russian military views as threatening. The findings of the report should also be useful to US and allied policymakers as they seek to ensure deterrence and provide stability in the Euro-Atlantic region.

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## Approach

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The goal of this report is to provide an overview of Russian military ideas regarding emerging threats from primarily foreign forces. The study has its roots in strategic culture theory, adhering to the idea that individuals are socialized into a mode of strategic thinking. Strategic culture theory posits that through this socialization process, a set of enduring beliefs, attitudes, and behavioral patterns regarding strategy emerges.<sup>4</sup> These patterns acquire a degree of permanence, elevating them to the level of “culture” rather than simply “policy.” Though shifts in technology and the international environment can influence attitudes, new challenges are not evaluated in a fully objective manner. Instead, they are interpreted through the lens of this established strategic culture.<sup>5</sup>

Building on this theoretical foundation, the report turns to empirical analysis to examine how Russian military analysts articulate their threat perceptions in contemporary debates on modern warfare. This report seeks to answer a central research question: How do Russian military analysts perceive the evolving nature of modern warfare at both the strategic and operational levels? To answer the main research question, we systematically examined Russian security defense periodicals from 2022 to 2025 to generate a sample. Using a set of key words, we were able to extract more than 130 articles that were directly relevant to the development of the Russian military’s views on threat perceptions. We also examined several books cited or discussed in these articles and consulted both official and unofficial Russian military dictionaries. Following this, we examined the articles that were directly relevant to the subject through a set of structured questions to answer the main research question.

## The “military”

This study uses the term *military* or the *military-analytical community* to refer to affiliations under the authority of the General Staff of the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation and the Russian Ministry of Defense (MOD), the core Russian military. The leadership of the Russian Armed Forces has generally maintained its relatively deferential role in decision-making, yielding to the civilian elite for major strategic and foreign policy decisions and preferring to

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<sup>4</sup> Colin S. Gray, “National Style in Strategy: The American Example,” *International Security* 6, no. 2 (1981), accessed Aug. 21, 2025, doi: 10.2307/2538645, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2538645>.

<sup>5</sup> Adamsky, *The Russian Way of Deterrence*.

implement rather than direct strategic thinking.<sup>6</sup> They rely on the Kremlin to set high-level military goals. Although the General Staff serves as a central hub for planning and operational decision-making within the Russian military, it respects its boundaries in relation to the political system and has not attempted to disrupt established civil-military relations.

However, the military still provides arguably the most important input among different stakeholders to Russian national security decision-making. Studying the views of the Russian military can provide national security scholars with critical insight into the origins of key concepts, the challenges these ideas were meant to address, and the theoretical foundations behind them—foundations that later influence strategic operations, capability development, and military exercises. These writings also help clarify the often-ambiguous language found in official documents. The purpose of the study is to identify points of consensus and debate regarding Russian threat perceptions. We defined *debate* as a cluster of writings centered on a fixed topic, though they may not be related to one another. Our assessment of these views is limited because we do not know how these writings influence classified discussions or plans.

This study draws on authoritative Russian-language articles primarily from *Voyennaya Mysl* [*Military Thought*] (*VM*), one of Russia's oldest and most prestigious official military publications, which is led by the General Staff. The periodical is approved by the General Staff, and it provides monthly insights into ongoing discussions about military, defense, security, technology, political, and historical issues that interest the Russian MOD and its network of affiliated departments and institutes. Although Russian forces are generally presented in a favorable light, many analyses in *VM* offer valuable insights into the most urgent military issues, reflecting current concerns and debates within the General Staff, the MOD, and their researchers. Along with *VM*, we examined articles from *Armeiski Sbornik*, another vetted magazine by the General Staff. To broaden the scope of our analysis, we also included select articles from *Strategicheskaya Stabilitnost* and *Nezavisimoe Voennoe Obozrenie*, which publish pieces by authors affiliated with the Russian military and civilian experts.

## Framing questions

To gather our data, we systematically surveyed articles from 2022 to 2025 to determine the evolution of Russian threat perceptions. We filtered the data through the following set of questions, which informed the research approach of this report:

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<sup>6</sup> Julian Waller and Cornell Overfield, *Wartime Russian Civil-Military Relations Dimensions, Tensions, and Disruptions*, CNA, DRM-2024-U-038041-1Rev, 2024, <https://www.cna.org/analyses/2025/02/wartime-russian-civil-military-relations>.

1. How do Russian military thinkers write about the concept of military threats and military dangers?
2. What do Russian military thinkers identify as military threats and military dangers implicitly or explicitly?
3. What measures do Russian military thinkers advocate to neutralize or deter the threats or dangers they mention?

Through these structured questions, we coded the data accordingly and identified key themes related to Russian threat perceptions to describe both debate and points of consensus. Afterward, we assembled the data according to key themes to present the findings. The final section of the report offers a conclusion highlighting the salient views identified in the report.

# Understanding Military Threats and Dangers

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This section is divided into two parts. The first part addresses the differences in Russian military thinkers' definitions of *military threats* and *military dangers*. The second part focuses on how the Russian military evaluates threats. This section should be viewed as a conceptual and practical framework for the reader.

## Military threats and military dangers: The prevailing view

Conceptually, Russia's 2014 military doctrine divides threats into two categories: "military dangers" and "military threats," with the latter indicating stronger aggravation.<sup>7</sup> The military danger phase is characterized by a hypothetical probability of damage to national interests by an adversary.<sup>8</sup> The military danger period can then transition to the next level, military threat.<sup>9</sup> The criteria to escalate to threat include clear evidence of hostile intent.<sup>10</sup> These distinctions matter because the terms *military threat* and *military danger* describe prekinetic stages of conflict between Russia and potential adversaries.<sup>11</sup> To assess escalation risks, the Russian

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<sup>7</sup> Andrew S. Bowen, *Russian Armed Forces: Military Doctrine and Strategy*, Congressional Research Service, 2020, [https://www.congress.gov/crs\\_external\\_products/IF/PDF/IF11625/IF11625.1.pdf](https://www.congress.gov/crs_external_products/IF/PDF/IF11625/IF11625.1.pdf); Olga Oliker, *Russia's New Military Doctrine: Same as the Old Doctrine, Mostly*, RAND, 2015, <https://www.rand.org/pubs/commentary/2015/01/russias-new-military-doctrine-same-as-the-old-doctrine.html>; President of Russia, *The Military Doctrine of the Russian Federation*, 2014, [https://rusmilsec.blog/wp-content/uploads/2021/08/mildoc\\_rf\\_2014\\_eng.pdf](https://rusmilsec.blog/wp-content/uploads/2021/08/mildoc_rf_2014_eng.pdf).

<sup>8</sup> M. F. Gatsko, "Geopolitics and Security: On the Essence of the Concepts 'Military Threat' and 'Military Danger,' Their Relationships in the System of Military Security of Russia [Геополитика и Безопасность. О сущности понятий "военная угроза" и "военная опасность", их соотношений в системе военной безопасности России]," *Military Thought* (2006).

<sup>9</sup> Roger McDermott, *Escalation Management à la Russe: The Kremlin's Threat Assessment, Forecasting, and Conflict Control Tools*, Saratoga Foundation, 2025, <https://drive.google.com/file/d/1zZBXbxd4GvM8rsibS9iPG4zrNoygReg0/view>.

<sup>10</sup> I. A. Kolesnikov and V. V. Kruglov, "On New Military Dangers and Threats to Russia," *Military Thought*, no. 6 (2024).

<sup>11</sup> Clint Reach, Vikram Kilambi, and Mark Cozad, *Russian Assessments and Applications of the Correlation of Forces and Means*, RAND, 2020, [https://www.rand.org/pubs/research\\_reports/RR4235.html](https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR4235.html).

military monitors force deployments and broader trends as part of its *voenno-politicheskaia obstanovka* (VPO, “military-political situation”) assessments.

At the same time, Russian military thinkers pose that key differences lie between the concepts of “threat” and “danger,” especially in the context of escalation management. For instance, M. F. Gatsko proposed that the category of “threat” is distinguished from that of “danger” by the degree of readiness to cause damage. He used the term *threat* to describe a stage of extreme aggravation of contradictions, a direct preconflict state in which one of the subjects is ready to use force against a specific object to achieve its political or other goals. Moreover, the “threatening period” in Russian military-analytical thinking is characterized by the readiness to harm the vital interests and security of Russia using armed violence.<sup>12</sup> *Danger* relates to a set of conditions for a potential threat to cause damage. According to Gatsko’s conceptualization, a threat is targeted and indicates a source, whereas a danger is often hypothetical. However, in this explanation, he draws from V. A. Zolotarev, who posits that a “military threat is a determined intention of any state (group of states) to unleash war against another state (group of states) or to damage its national interests and sovereignty by aggressive actions.”<sup>13</sup>

Russian military-analytical thinking about the concepts of military dangers and military threats in the past couple of years has focused mainly on the evolving relationship between these two categories in a rapidly changing threat environment. In a 1996 *VM* article, L. V. Manilov defined *threat* as “an immediate ‘danger’ of causing damage to vital national interests and national security, which goes beyond the local framework and affects the basic national values: sovereignty, statehood, and territorial integrity.”<sup>14</sup> His interpretation of *threat* through the category of danger stresses how difficult it is to strictly outline the parameters of both concepts.

Within Russian military thinking, threats and dangers can simultaneously coexist and can evolve and devolve according to the security environment. In a 2006 *VM* article, Gatsko built on Manilov’s conceptualization and adhered to the idea of interpreting threats through the category of dangers and vice versa.<sup>15</sup> He argued that dangers could evolve into threats, and threats could devolve into dangers. His main illustrative example is the threat of nuclear war.

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<sup>12</sup> Michael Kofman, Anya Fink, and Jeff Edmonds, *Russian Strategy for Escalation Management: Evolution of Key Concepts*, CNA, 2020, <https://www.cna.org/reports/2020/04/russian-strategy-for-escalation-management-key-concepts>.

<sup>13</sup> V. A. Zolotarev, *Military Security of the Fatherland (A Historical-Legal Study)* [Военная безопасность Отечества (историко-правовое исследование)] (Canon-Press—Kulikovo Field, 1998).

<sup>14</sup> L. V. Manilov, “Threats to the National Security of the Russian Federation [Угрозы национальной безопасности России],” *Military Thought*, no. 1 (1996).

<sup>15</sup> Gatsko, “Geopolitics and Security.”

Through arms control, Russia managed to decrease the kinetic threat of nuclear war. Nonetheless, Moscow still faced a series of increased dangers during the late 1990s, including the possible spread of dangerous military technologies and the possible escalation of local conflicts in its periphery.

The difficulty of outlining parameters for both concepts continues to be present in the writings of Russian military thinkers today even when discussing hybrid threats. Echoing the work of Chief of the General Staff Valery Gerasimov, who warned about the blurring lines between peace and war, A. V. Serzhantov from the Military Academy of the General Staff of the Russian Federation Armed Forces and D. A. Pavlov wrote that “the hybrid nature of the actions of potential adversaries does not allow us to clearly determine the moment when a hybrid danger becomes a threat.”<sup>16</sup> This statement shows that Russian military thinkers view external and internal threats as interconnected. Gerasimov wrote about Russia’s views of US approaches to conflict, particularly US involvement in the Middle East and its support of “color revolutions” in Russia’s perceived sphere of influence. Gerasimov highlighted that nonmilitary measures, combined with a population’s “protest potential,” are used to achieve “desired objectives,” underscoring a long-standing Russian threat perception regarding color revolutions and Western-backed regime changes.<sup>17</sup>

According to the two authors, the source of threats can be both kinetic and non-kinetic, but these two categories of threats can influence each other and manifest themselves in various areas of national security, paralleling Gatsko’s views about the synergy between the concepts of threat and danger.<sup>18</sup> This is logical, considering that ideas about the focus of nonmilitary means, such as those of the 2013 Gerasimov article, are more relevant to periods of military danger or military threat, rather than actual warfare or armed conflict. However, outlining the differences between these two concepts is complex.<sup>19</sup>

More recent Russian thinking about the conceptual likeness threats somewhat builds on this principle. In a 2024 article, Lieutenant General I. A. Kolesnikov and Major General V. V. Kruglov argue that, although little semantic difference exists between the concepts of threat and

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<sup>16</sup> A. V. Serzhantov and D. A. Pavlov, “The Hybrid Nature of Dangers and Threats, Their Impact on the System of Ensuring the Military Security of the Russian Federation [Гибридный характер опасностей и угроз, их влияние на систему обеспечения военной безопасности Российской Федерации],” *Military Thought*, no. 5 (2022).

<sup>17</sup> Michael Kofman et al., *Russian Military Strategy: Core Tenets and Operational Concepts*, CNA, DRM-2021-U-029755-1Rev, 2021, <https://www.cna.org/reports/2021/10/Russian-Military%20Strategy-Core-Tenets-and-Operational-Concepts.pdf>.

<sup>18</sup> Gatsko, “Geopolitics and Security.”

<sup>19</sup> Kofman et al., *Russian Military Strategy*; Valery Gerasimov, “The Value of Science Is in the Foresight: New Challenges Demand Rethinking the Forms and Methods of Carrying out Combat Operations,” *Military Review* (Translated on January-February 2016 [Original: 2013]), [https://www.armyupress.army.mil/Portals/7/military-review/Archives/English/MilitaryReview\\_20160228\\_art008.pdf](https://www.armyupress.army.mil/Portals/7/military-review/Archives/English/MilitaryReview_20160228_art008.pdf).

danger, the former is active while the latter is passive.<sup>20</sup> This means that the transition from the category of danger to threat depends on the means (readiness) and intent of the adversary to potentially cause damage to Russia. Moreover, these authors describe the two concepts and their relationship as categories akin to law and principle, with threat serving as the principle (an imperative of law). If an adversary were to have means but no intent or unclear intent, it is likely to be classified as a danger rather than as a threat. This differs slightly from Gatsko's definition, which prioritizes the means by which an adversary can cause damage and the level of damage they can cause to differentiate threat from danger.

It is important to note that contemporary writing on military threats and military dangers tends to employ the term *military danger* rather than *military threat*. The reason seems to be a consensus that the Russian military security system currently faces a variety of hybrid threats from the US and other NATO member states. Because of the prolonged nature of these threats, they are currently perceived only as potential dangers that could evolve into threats.<sup>21</sup> But this perception varies among military thinkers and their overall assumptions about the likelihood of a kinetic NATO-Russia conflict in the short to medium term.<sup>22</sup> Thus, Russian military-analytical thinking continues to grapple with the complex and interconnected nature of military dangers and military threats, reflecting evolving perspectives within the Russian military community.

## How the Russian military evaluates threats

This section discusses how the Russian military evaluates threats. Russia sees threats in accordance with conflict levels and possible escalation pathways. The terms *military threat* and *military danger* refer to periods of conflict with prekinetic actions between Russia and possible adversaries. To determine escalation pathways, the Russian military continues to monitor force deployments to evaluate the threat level in a specific region and determine the need for corresponding countermeasures through an analysis of trends.<sup>23</sup> This force monitoring could be part of what the Russians refer to as a VPO assessment, according to a RAND report. This is the main assessment in which the Russian military assesses emerging threats and belongs under the purview under the National Defense Management Center, which lies under the

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<sup>20</sup> Kolesnikov and Kruglov, "On New Military Dangers and Threats to Russia."

<sup>21</sup> Serzhantov and Pavlov, "The Hybrid Nature of Dangers and Threats, Their Impact on the System of Ensuring the Military Security of the Russian Federation"; Gatsko, "Geopolitics and Security."

<sup>22</sup> A. A. Bartosh, "Escalation Models of Modern Military Conflicts [Модели эскалации современных военных конфликтов]," *Voennaya Mysl*, no. 1 (2024); I. O. Kostyukov, "NATO's Military Activities as the Main Source of Military Threat to Russia," *Military Thought*, no. 5 (2024).

<sup>23</sup> Reach, Kilambi, and Cozad, *Russian Assessments and Applications of the Correlation of Forces and Means*.

General Staff. The National Defense Management Center is responsible for monitoring and processing the VPO and disseminating it to the Russian General Staff, the MOD, and, potentially, the president.<sup>24</sup>

Understanding Russian assessments of force balance through the VPO and correlation of forces and means (COFM) is essential to interpreting how the military perceives threats, especially in the context of Russia's war on Ukraine. The VPO is evaluated at global, regional, and local levels periodically and provides insights into how Russia assesses the force balance in each theater.<sup>25</sup> Although the terms *military-political situation* or *VPO* may not be employed in the writings of the military-analytical community, the relationship between the VPO and COFM provides insight into how Russians determine threats and propose countermeasures to counterthreats.<sup>26</sup> Interestingly, the VPO is typically not mentioned in discussions about the COFM, which refers to the military balance between two adversaries at the global, regional, and local levels, offering a relative assessment of one side's military superiority over the other.

Although little is known about the VPO assessment, according to some sources, the main goal of the assessment of the "military-political situation" is the timely identification of the enemy's possible courses of actions and the detection of any preparations for an imminent global or nuclear missile strike against Russia using air and space means, both conventional and nuclear.<sup>27</sup> The VPO assessment involves evaluating the alignment of the strategic deterrence forces' actions with the evolving situation while appraising potential threats to critical state and military facilities, troop groupings, and the control system.<sup>28</sup> It also provides the necessary information and analytical materials to develop proposals for addressing strategic deterrence challenges under current and anticipated conditions.

However, the Russian military considers the practice of forecasting to be an extremely complicated endeavor. The VPO attempts to evaluate potential threats, keep track of geopolitical developments, and guide strategic decision-making. Within the context of the National Defense Management Center, the VPO combines qualitative and quantitative methodologies to provide a framework to identify escalation thresholds, evaluate risks, and

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<sup>24</sup> Reach, Kilambi, and Cozad, *Russian Assessments and Applications of the Correlation of Forces and Means*; McDermott, *Escalation Management à la Russe*.

<sup>25</sup> Reach, Kilambi, and Cozad, *Russian Assessments and Applications of the Correlation of Forces and Means*.

<sup>26</sup> Reach, Kilambi, and Cozad, *Russian Assessments and Applications of the Correlation of Forces and Means*.

<sup>27</sup> D. S. Belenkov, A. S. Borisenko, and V. V. Sukhorutchenko, "Current Issues of Automation of Strategic Situation Assessment in Solving Strategic Deterrence Problems [Актуальные вопросы автоматизации оценки стратегической обстановки при решении задач стратегического сдерживани]," *Military Thought*, no. 8 (2024).

prioritize measures across the military, diplomatic, and informational domains.<sup>29</sup> However, according to a report by Andrew Monaghan, the quality of forecasting is highly inconsistent and plagued by issues, including the lack of standardized methods for modeling the assessment of military-political conditions, the strategic nature of military threats, and achievable levels of military security.<sup>30</sup>

In addition, there are no methodologies for establishing sufficient combat capability to counter potential military threats, and the operational models for strategic and operational combat activities are outdated.<sup>31</sup> Moreover, the number of qualified researchers capable of conducting such work is in “irreversible decline,” and the operational staff at various levels of military leadership still mistrusts mathematical modeling methods, viewing them as an additional and unjustifiable burden.<sup>32</sup>

As a result, proposals to improve Russia’s forecasting and assessment capabilities that may or may not be related to the VPO continue to appear in the pages of Russia’s military-defense journals. For example, in 2022, Serzhantov called for more efficient coordination within the Russian government to enhance military security by establishing interdepartmental working (expert) groups. These groups would be responsible for conducting comprehensive analysis, forecasting dangers and threats, and empowering scientific organizations to engage in “horizontal” interaction and prepare medium- and long-term forecasts and scenarios for potential dangers and threats.<sup>33</sup> In contrast, in 2024, D. S. Belenkov, A. S. Borisenko, and V. V. Sukhorutchenko placed greater emphasis on the development of new analytical tools to better assess conflict escalation.<sup>34</sup> They argued that military forecasting could be enhanced by increasing the use of automation tools to generate integrated quantitative and qualitative assessments, and they advocated for the integration of advanced technologies to address this challenge.

The evaluation of threats within the Russian military remains a complex and evolving process. The Russian military-analytical community categorizes threats based on conflict levels and

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<sup>29</sup> McDermott, *Escalation Management à la Russe*.

<sup>30</sup> Andrew Monaghan, *How Moscow Understands War and Military Strategy*, CNA, IOP-2020-U-028629-Final, 2020, <https://www.cna.org/reports/2020/11/IOP-2020-U-028629-Final.pdf>.

<sup>31</sup> McDermott, *Escalation Management à la Russe*.

<sup>32</sup> Monaghan, *How Moscow Understands War and Military Strategy*.

<sup>33</sup> Serzhantov and Pavlov, “The Hybrid Nature of Dangers and Threats, Their Impact on the System of Ensuring the Military Security of the Russian Federation”; A. V. Serzhantov, A. V. Smolovy, and I. A. Terentev, “Transformation of the Content of War: Contours of Military Conflicts of the Future [Трансформация содержания войны: контуры военных конфликтов будущего],” *Voennaia Mysl*, no. 6 (2022).

<sup>34</sup> Belenkov, Borisenko, and Sukhorutchenko, “Current Issues of Automation of Strategic Situation Assessment in Solving Strategic Deterrence Problems.”

potential escalation, with military dangers representing hypothetical risks and military threats indicating clear hostile intent. The process of threat assessment is conducted through the VPO, which involves monitoring force deployments and geopolitical developments to guide strategic decision-making. Despite the importance of this assessment, the Russian military faces significant challenges in forecasting, including inconsistent methodologies, outdated operational models, and a decline in qualified researchers. As a result, there are ongoing proposals to enhance forecasting capabilities, such as improving coordination within the government and developing new analytical tools, including automation and advanced technologies.

## Identifying Threats

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This section outlines the various threats identified in Russian military writings, organized by key themes. Although some themes are deeply interconnected, they have been categorized separately because of the volume of material available on each subject. For instance, Russian military writings often intertwine nonnuclear and nuclear capabilities with discussions about missile defense, yet these topics can also be treated independently. It is important to note that this section does not cover the mitigation strategies for every threat because some writings do not address how to counter these threats.

### NATO's military means

Much has been written about Russia's relationship with the West and how it views NATO. Russia's list of grievances goes back decades, stemming from the Russian belief that the US lacked respect for Russia's interests as it recovered from the crisis of the 1990s following the collapse of the Soviet Union.<sup>35</sup> Most publications regarding Russia's military threat perceptions in the past decade focus on the development of two US programs (discussed in the following paragraphs) that continued to shape Russian military planning.<sup>36</sup> Despite the significant changes in the geopolitical landscape, particularly Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, Russian military thinkers reiterate that the development of these two programs constitutes a military threat to Russia's strategic deterrence capabilities.

The first program relates to the extension of ballistic missile defense (BMD) components in Eastern Europe. Russia perceives that the MK-41 launchers employed in the Aegis Ashore

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<sup>35</sup> Mary Sarotte, *Not One Inch: America, Russia, and the Making of Post-Cold War Stalemate* (Yale University Press, 2021); Kimberly Marten, "NATO Enlargement: Evaluating Its Consequences in Russia," *International Politics* 57, no. 3 (2020), doi: 10.1057/s41311-020-00233-9, <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41311-020-00233-9>; Stephen Blank, "Threats to and from Russia: An Assessment," *Journal of Slavic Military Studies* 21, no. 3 (2008), <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/13518040802313746#d1e183>.

<sup>36</sup> Charles K. Bartles, "Russian Threat Perception and the Ballistic Missile Defense System," *The Journal of Slavic Military Studies* 30, no. 2 (2017), <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/13518046.2017.1307016>; Blank, "Threats to and from Russia"; Sarotte, *Not One Inch*; L. I. Olshtinsky, "Growth of Military Threats and Strengthening Military Capability of the State: The Historical Experience of Russia [Наращение военной угрозы и укрепление обороноспособности государства. Опыт истории России]," *Military Thought*, no. 4 (2022); L. I. Olshtynsky, "The Nature of the Modern Military Threat to Russia and the Experience of History," *Military Thought*, no. 6 (2021); Dmitry Polikanov, "Russia's Perception and Hierarchy of Security Threats," *The Quarterly Journal* (2005), [https://globalnetplatform.org/system/files/1/Russias%20Perception%20and%20Hierarchy%20of%20Security%20Threats\\_Dmitry%20POLIKANOV.pdf](https://globalnetplatform.org/system/files/1/Russias%20Perception%20and%20Hierarchy%20of%20Security%20Threats_Dmitry%20POLIKANOV.pdf); Zellner et al., *Threat Perceptions in the OSCE Area*.

ground-based missile defense components stationed in Romania and Poland can be used for offensive purposes. This is because the MK-41 launchers could launch Tomahawk cruise missiles and target Russian intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBMs), posing a threat to its retaliatory strike capability and undermining deterrence.<sup>37</sup> Russia also claimed that the deployment of the ground-based MK-41 launch system violated the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty.

Russia's reasoning for its angst over the second program of concern—the US Prompt Global Strike (PGS) program, which refers to a DoD program under development that would provide the United States the capability to destroy a target anywhere on earth with conventional weapons within as little as an hour without relying on forward-based force—follows a similar logic. Russia is concerned that a PGS attack would eliminate Russia's offensive and defensive strategic deterrence forces before they could even be deployed.<sup>38</sup>

In the years before the Ukraine war, Russian military-analytical writings about these two topics centered on the scenario of a massed air-space attack in which NATO members execute US-led conventional precision strikes against key military and economic infrastructure from air and sea and on Russia's ability to counter and disrupt such an attack during the initial period of war.<sup>39</sup> Little has changed since Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine. Russian military thinkers are consistent in their views that the development of these two programs continues to constitute a military threat to Russia's strategic deterrence capabilities.<sup>40</sup> Most discussions about space threats also hinge on the development of these two programs.

At least part of the reasoning behind the lack of evolution in Russian threat perceptions may be that the issue of a conventional strike disabling nuclear capabilities, which has dominated Russian military-analytical thought for over 20 years, continues to be the most common

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<sup>37</sup> Bartles, "Russian Threat Perception and the Ballistic Missile Defense System."

<sup>38</sup> Bartles, "Russian Threat Perception and the Ballistic Missile Defense System."

<sup>39</sup> Reach, Kilambi, and Cozad, *Russian Assessments and Applications of the Correlation of Forces and Means*.

<sup>40</sup> E. A. Shlotov, A. S. Borisenko, and V. V. Sukhorutchenko, "Identification of the Main Threats to the Military Security of the Russian Federation, Taking into Account the Current Military-Political and Strategic Situation [Выявление основных угроз военной безопасности Российской Федерации с учетом современной военно-политической и стратегической обстановки]," *Military Thought*, no. 2 (2025); V. I. Lumpov and I. R. Fazletdinov, "The Role of Strategic Rocket Forces in Countering NATO Multi-Domain Operations [Роль Ракетных войск стратегического назначения в противодействии стратегической многосферной операции НАТО]," *Military Thought*, no. 5 (2023); A. K. Mar'in, "Specifics of Strategic Deterrence in the Present Conditions [Особенности стратегического сдерживания в современных условиях]," *Military Thought*, no. 12 (2023); R. O. Nogin, "Threats to Strategic Missile Forces Facilities from Air and Space Attacks [Об угрозах объектам Ракетных войск стратегического назначения от ударов средств воздушно-космического нападения]," *Military Thought*, no. 5 (2022).

planning scenario concerning a possible kinetic war with NATO.<sup>41</sup> In addition, the proposed Russian response to this scenario remains the same: the key to victory appears to be a focus on decisive action to inflict “unacceptable damage” on an adversary and escalation control.<sup>42</sup>

Although Russian security concerns regarding US military capabilities are largely the same, Russian military thinkers have extended these concerns to potential US deployments to Finland and Sweden. In other words, Russia’s ongoing war in Ukraine and its consequences has sharpened and heightened its previously existing concerns about threats. Russian military theorists remain deeply concerned about perceived Russian conventional inferiority against NATO as Russia’s own military faces attrition in Ukraine.<sup>43</sup> Thus, other traditional threats that persist in Russian military-analytical thinking include NATO’s military contingents in the Baltic and Black Seas. These developments have prompted Russian military thinkers to continue reflecting on the effects of these changes on the military balance.

Russian threat perceptions vis-à-vis NATO remain largely unchanged. Russian military thinkers are expanding upon pre-2022 threat perceptions and reinforcing their views on which NATO activities constitute a threat to Russia’s security, likely due to perceived conventional inferiority. In essence, Russian military thinkers believe that the US and NATO are preparing for a long-term confrontation with Russia and remain deeply wedded to their doctrine. The following sections discuss the perceived threats in depth.

## Military assistance to Ukraine

Russian officials tend to describe the war in Ukraine as a defensive campaign essential to safeguarding Russia’s national security. The 2014 military doctrine reflects a belief that the West is waging a primarily nonmilitary subversive campaign against Russia.<sup>44</sup> This perspective

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<sup>41</sup> Michael Petersen, Paul Schwartz, and Gabriela Iveliz Rosa-Hernandez, *Russian Concepts of Future Warfare Based on Lessons from the Ukraine War*, CNA, DRM-2025-U-041457-1Rev, 2025, <https://www.cna.org/analyses/2025/08/russian-concepts-of-future-warfare-based-on-lessons-from-the-ukraine-war>; Roger McDermott and Charles Bartles, *An Assessment of the Initial Period of War: Russia-Ukraine 2022 Part Two*, Foreign Military Studies Office, 2023, <https://fmso.tradoc.army.mil/2023/2023-06-08-an-assessment-of-the-initial-period-of-war-russia-ukraine-2022-part-2-roger-n-mcdermott-lieutenant-colonel-charles-k-bartles/>.

<sup>42</sup> Anya Fink, Gabriela Iveliz Rosa-Hernandez, and Cornell Overfield, *Moscow Does Not Believe in Tears: Russia’s Political-Military Establishment Debates Credibility of Nuclear Threats and Potential Nuclear Employment*, CNA, DRM-2024-U-038138-1Rev, 2024, <https://www.cna.org/reports/2024/09/Moscow-Does-Not-Believe-in-Tears.pdf>; Anya Fink, *The General Staff’s Throw-Weight: The Russian Military’s Role in and Views of US-Russian Arms Control*, CNA, IRM-2024-U-037906-Final, 2024, <https://www.cna.org/reports/2024/03/Russian-Military-Role-in-US-Russian-Arms-Control.pdf>.

<sup>43</sup> Kolesnikov and Kruglov, “On New Military Dangers and Threats to Russia”; Kostyukov, “NATO’s Military Activities as the Main Source of Military Threat to Russia.”

<sup>44</sup> Olikier, *Russia’s New Military Doctrine*; President of Russia, *The Military Doctrine of the Russian Federation*.

is shaped significantly by Russian interpretations of the Arab Spring and the so-called color revolutions in the post-Soviet space, including the 2014 Maidan Revolution.<sup>45</sup> Just a month before the full-scale invasion of Ukraine, Russian General V. P. Baranov wrote about a series of troubling developments in Ukraine.<sup>46</sup> Among the most concerning was the substantial military assistance Ukraine was receiving from the United States (including extensive support on the ground and Ukraine's gradual integration with NATO), which enhanced its interoperability with NATO forces.

The failure of Russia's initial 2022 campaign resulted in unprecedented military assistance to Ukraine from the US and its allies. Because of this assistance, in 2023, Deputy Foreign Minister Sergey Ryabkov stated, "Now we are in the phase of a hot conflict with the United States. We are witnessing the direct involvement of that country in a hybrid war with Russia on various fronts."<sup>47</sup> According to Russian military thinkers, Russia now faces a Western-backed Ukraine, with the West using Ukraine as a proxy in a broader confrontation.<sup>48</sup> These writings reflect deep anxiety over Ukraine's growing offensive capabilities and the strategic challenge of coexisting with a militarized Ukraine, even if a ceasefire eventually occurs. This interpretation aligns with a broader narrative promoted by Russian leadership: that a US-led West is not only supporting Ukraine but actively pursuing policies intended to weaken or destroy Russia.

Before 2022, Russian military analysts feared that Western military support would increase the combat readiness of the Ukrainian armed forces. Now, they see a Western-backed Ukraine as a launchpad for attacks on Russian territory. In their analyses, the expansion of Western

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<sup>45</sup> Kofman et al., *Russian Military Strategy: Core Tenets and Operational Concepts*.

<sup>46</sup> V. P. Baranov, "Ukraine-NATO: An Anti-Russia Project [Украина-НАТО: Проект Анти-Россия]," *Military Thought*, no. 2 (2022); Amund Osflaten, "Russian Forecasting and Pre-Emption: The Prelude to the Invasion of Ukraine," *Scandinavian Journal of Military Studies* 8, no. 1 (2025), <https://sjms.nu/articles/10.31374/sjms.361#russian-strategic-forecasting>.

<sup>47</sup> "Russia, US Are in Hot Conflict Phase—Senior Diplomat," *Tass*, 2023, <https://tass.com/politics/1599707>.

<sup>48</sup> Baranov, "Ukraine-NATO: An Anti-Russia Project"; Kolesnikov and Kruglov, "On New Military Dangers and Threats to Russia"; V. V. Kirillov and M. I. Nuzha, "Transformation of Relations Between Russia and the USA from Partnership to Confrontation [Трансформация отношений России и США от партнерства до конфронтации]," *Military Thought*, no. 10 (2024); Alexander Bartosh, "Proxy-War as an Important Factor in the Military Conflicts of the 21st Century [Прокси-война как определяющий фактор военных конфликтов XXI века]," *Military Thought*, no. 5 (2023); Aleksandr Bartosh, "Factors of Surprise Yesterday and Today [Фактор внезапности вчера и сегодня]," *Nezavisimoe voennoe obozrenie*, no. 2 (2023); Aleksandr Bartosh, "Deterrence Takes Other Forms [Сдерживание приобретает различные оттенки]," *Nezavisimoe voennoe obozrenie*, no. 24 (2023); Aleksandr Bartosh, "A Punishing Sword in the Hands of Russia [Карающий меч в руках России]," *Nezavisimoe voennoe obozrenie*, no. 3 (2023); Aleksandr Bartosh, "The US and NATO Are on the Warpath [США и НАТО пошли по тропе войны]," *Nezavisimoe voennoe obozrenie*, no. 29 (2023); Aleksandr Alekseyevich Moiseyev, "Strategic Requirements for the Development of the Navy Potential of Russia Taking into Account the Experience of the Special Military Operation in Ukraine [Стратегические требования к развитию военно-морского потенциала России с учетом опыта специальной военной операции на Украине]," *Military Thought*, no. 9 (2024).

military aid is often linked to Ukraine's strikes on Russian soil. For example, in 2024, Kolesnikov and Kruglov wrote that a "no less scary military threat is the attacks on populated areas in Russia, strikes on military and important economic objects in the territory of Russia which have been conducted by the Ukrainians through strikes," especially considering the targeting data provided by the United States.<sup>49</sup> Admiral I. O. Kostyukov of the Main Intelligence Directorate of the General Staff echoed this concern, identifying NATO's full-fledged support for Ukraine, particularly the provision of long-range ground strike capabilities as a major threat. Alongside this, his article highlighted the F-16 fighter aircraft as another major threat.<sup>50</sup> He argued that these capabilities enable Ukraine to target vital infrastructure deep inside Russia.

However, Russian analysts do not see these weapons as a decisive factor. Implicitly, these discussions also reflect the symbolic importance of US strike assets in Russia's near abroad. Russian military thinkers frequently stress the risks of escalation between the US and Russia. In 2023, retired Colonel Alexander Bartosh warned that F-16s, which can carry nuclear weapons, pose a nuclear threat to Russia. He argued that their delivery to Ukraine escalated the conflict and was intended to prolong it.<sup>51</sup> Bartosh also claimed that the US and its allies aim to "saturate" Ukraine and NATO border states with advanced, high-precision, long-range weapons; nuclear-capable aircraft, such as the F-35; and strike and reconnaissance drones. He suggested that such deployments signal Washington's willingness to escalate from a proxy war to a regional conflict, even if these systems offer only limited military value.

Clearly, Russian military thinkers are deeply concerned about adversary conventional capabilities, particularly weapons that could strike Russian territory, undermine state stability, and degrade military capacity. This concern is especially evident in discussions of potential Ukrainian attacks on Russia's nuclear infrastructure and strategic forces. Worries about drone strikes targeting strategic assets are not new. In 2021, authors from the Strategic Missile Forces Academy warned that NATO could use unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs) to strike Strategic Missile Forces installations, noting that Russia's air defenses struggle to detect low-flying drones.<sup>52</sup>

Since 2022, the Russian government has characterized these strikes as the reddest of Russia's red lines. In 2023, following Ukrainian attacks on the Dyagilevo and Engels air bases, Bartosh

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<sup>49</sup> Kolesnikov and Kruglov, "On New Military Dangers and Threats to Russia."

<sup>50</sup> Kostyukov, "NATO's Military Activities as the Main Source of Military Threat to Russia."

<sup>51</sup> Bartosh, "Factors of Surprise Yesterday and Today"; Bartosh, "A Punishing Sword in the Hands of Russia"; Bartosh, "The US and NATO Are on the Warpath."

<sup>52</sup> I. S. Afonin et al., "On the Question of Forming an Information Strike Defensive Group for Protecting Strategic Missile Force Facilities," *Military Thought*, no. 2 (2021).

advocated for a more offensive nuclear doctrine, suggesting that Russia should be prepared to strike NATO countries involved in supporting Ukraine.<sup>53</sup> He also called for targeting critical infrastructure within Ukraine as a means of escalation control. In 2024, Major General Roman Nogin, deputy head of the Strategic Missile Forces Academy, emphasized the need to recognize that adversary UAVs could undermine the “combat stability” of Russia’s Strategic Missile Forces.<sup>54</sup> These warnings seemed theoretical until the 2025 success of Operation Spiderweb, Ukraine’s drone strike on Russian strategic aviation. Ironically, Nogin, along with V. Ye Kazarin and V. D. Rodulgin, a scholar who has published multiple articles throughout the years about singular strikes against an opponent’s critical infrastructure elements, warned in late 2024 about the possibility of small UAVs being used by sabotage and reconnaissance units in the vicinity of Russia’s nuclear deterrent forces, mainly those specific grouping of troops intended to perform a specific combat mission during war time, such as the employment of conventional weapons, retaliatory counterstrike and retaliatory strike.<sup>55</sup>

However, as pointed out by multiple Western analysts, the published military literature focused on threats to the Strategic Missile Forces and its system of support rather than on strategic aviation.<sup>56</sup> But it is safe to say that although these articles did not predict Operation Spiderweb specifically, they identified the broader threat. Ultimately, these developments suggest a widening gap between conceptual warning and operational readiness within the Russian military. But what is definitive is that many of the fears expressed by Russian analysts have been realized.

If anything, what may be a particularly new implicit aspect of this threat, according to these writings, is that they hint at the idea that short-range predeployed unmanned aerial systems (UAS) could serve as the means for a conventional strike that could disable Russia’s nuclear capability, creating a challenge for strategic stability.

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<sup>53</sup> Bartosh, “A Punishing Sword in the Hands of Russia.”

<sup>54</sup> R. O. Nogin, “On the Question of Further Development of the Operational Art of the Strategic Missile Forces [К вопросу о дальнейшем развитии оперативного искусства Ракетных войск стратегического назначения],” *Military Thought*, no. 11 (2024).

<sup>55</sup> R. O. Nogin, V. Ye Kazarin, and V. D. Rodulgin, “Methodical Approach to The Study of Combat Stability of Strategic Missile Forces Groupings [Методический подход к исследованию боевой устойчивости группировки РВЧН],” *Military Thought*, no. 9 (2024).

<sup>56</sup> Among those who pointed this out were Dara Massicott and Oleg Shakirov; Oleg (Shakirov2036) Shakirov, “Russian defense scholars have been worried for years that high-precision weapons including UAVs could be used (by the U.S.) to target strategic nuclear forces. E.g. this paragraph in a 2021 article by researchers of the academies of General Staff & RVSN,” Post, X, 2025, <https://x.com/shakirov2036/status/1929160841959502019>.

## Expansion of NATO military infrastructure

Before Russia's war on Ukraine, Russian leaders had often focused on the expansion of military infrastructure in existing NATO member states near Russia's borders. Russia's 2014 doctrine identifies military dangers related to "the advancement of NATO member countries' military infrastructure near the borders of the Russian Federation" and the "deployment (buildup) of foreign military contingents in countries neighboring the Russian Federation and its allies, as well as in adjacent waters, aimed at exerting political and military pressure on the Russian Federation."<sup>57</sup> These concerns are particularly evident in the context of Kaliningrad, as much of the secondary literature highlights Russian anxieties about this region as a primary driver of such threat perceptions.<sup>58</sup>

Before 2022, Finland and Sweden were nonaligned militarily, although they closely cooperated with NATO, prompting Russian complaints. In fact, Defense Minister Sergey Shoigu at the time regarded the enhanced cooperation between NATO and the two countries as steps taken by "Western colleagues" that would lead to the "destruction of the current security system, increase mistrust, and force" Russia "to take countermeasures."<sup>59</sup> As a result, Russian military thinkers admit that NATO's capacity has been bolstered by Finland and Sweden joining the alliance, and that the accession of these two states creates new challenges for Russia's force planning surrounding Kaliningrad. In 2023, then-Commander of the Russian Navy, Nikolai Evmenov, adopted a term for the Baltic Sea used by Western entities—"a NATO lake"—in an article.<sup>60</sup> He highlighted how easy it would be for NATO members to block transport from mainland western Russia to Kaliningrad if the Estonian and Finnish navies used sea mines to block the Gulf of Finland.

Even before Vladimir Putin's 2007 Munich speech, in which he famously criticized NATO expansion, Russian concerns about the alliance had been building for years. According to Stephen Blank, these worries had become an increasingly prominent part of both official rhetoric and public discourse in Russia.<sup>61</sup> Throughout the 2000s, Russian military analysts

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<sup>57</sup> Dmitry Gorenburg, "Russia's Strategic Calculus: Threat Perceptions and Military Doctrine," Ponars Policy Memo, 2016, <https://www.ponarseurasia.org/russia-s-strategic-calculus-threat-perceptions-and-military-doctrine/>; President of Russia, *The Military Doctrine of the Russian Federation*.

<sup>58</sup> Kristin Ven Bruusgaard, "Russian Nuclear Strategy and Conventional Inferiority," *Journal of Strategic Studies* 44, no. 1 (2021), doi: 10.1080/01402390.2020.1818070, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01402390.2020.1818070>.

<sup>59</sup> "Russia Threatens Counter-Measures if Finland and Sweden Join NATO," YLE, 2018, <https://yle.fi/a/3-10321784>.

<sup>60</sup> N. A. Yevmenov, "Main Trends of Change the Nature and Content of the Military Threats to the Russian Federation from Ocean and Sea Directions [Основные тенденции изменения характера и содержания военных угроз Российской Федерации с океанских и морских направлений]," *Military Thought*, no. 5 (2023).

<sup>61</sup> Blank, "Threats to and from Russia."

highlighted a range of perceived threats, including the conventional military balance with NATO and the extension of missile defense systems into Central and Eastern Europe. Nevertheless, it was Russia's war in Georgia in 2008 and its actions in 2014 that prompted NATO to adjust its force posture.<sup>62</sup>

As a result, Russian military thinkers consistently displayed anxiety about NATO encroachment from all directions as they perceived possible disadvantages in a protracted war even if NATO sought to deter by punishment. In 2014, NATO assembled four battalion tactical groups as an "enhanced forward presence" consisting of 5,000 troops in the Baltic countries and Poland as part of a larger NATO Response Force that grew to 40,000 in the Baltic Sea region in 2017.<sup>63</sup> NATO also established a tailored deterrence presence in the southeast. As Shoigu put it in 2024, "The NATO alliance's troops approached the Russian borders and created additional threats to military security. I want to emphasize that it was not us, but they came to us. This once again shows that it is impossible to believe the Western countries."<sup>64</sup>

If anything, Russia's war on Ukraine has made Russian military thinkers a lot more nervous about their country's perceived conventional inferiority. The military-analytical community seems aware that previous assessments of Russian capabilities in Western states credited Moscow with significant technological advances, production capacity, and skilled personnel. However, the war in Ukraine has exposed gaps in Russia's military apparatus and created new ones.<sup>65</sup> The onset of the full-scale invasion was characterized by failures of planning and command and control (C2), difficulties in combined arms operations, and limited capacity for

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<sup>62</sup> Ven Bruusgaard, "Russian Nuclear Strategy and Conventional Inferiority."

<sup>63</sup> Elizabeth Arberti, "Russia's Threat Perceptions in the Barents and Baltic Sea Regions," *IFS Insights*, no. 5 (2021), [https://fhs.bragu.unit.no/fhs-xmlui/bitstream/handle/11250/2762844/IFS%20Insight%205\\_2021%20.pdf?sequence=1](https://fhs.bragu.unit.no/fhs-xmlui/bitstream/handle/11250/2762844/IFS%20Insight%205_2021%20.pdf?sequence=1).

<sup>64</sup> Sergei Shoigu, "The NATO Alliance's Troops Approached the Russian Borders and Created Additional Threats to Military Security. I Want to Emphasise That It Was Not Us, but They Came to Us. This Once Again Shows That It Is Impossible to Believe the Western Countries," *Interaffairs* (2024), <https://en.interaffairs.ru/article/sergei-shoigu-the-nato-alliance-s-troops-approached-the-russian-borders-and-created-additional-thr/>.

<sup>65</sup> V. I. Orlyansky, A. A. Gerasimov, and E. V. Bitner, "Problems of Maneuvering Troops Under Conditions of Use of Modern Intelligence Systems [Проблема маневра войсками в условиях применения противником современных разведывательных систем]," *Military Thought*, no. 8 (2024); V. Orlyansky, V. P. Gerasimov, and S. N. Rudenko, "The Problem of Maneuvering Troops in Conditions of the Enemy's Use of Modern Reconnaissance Systems [Проблема маневра войсками в условиях применения противником современных разведывательных систем]," *Military Thought*, no. 7 (2024).

battlefield communications.<sup>66</sup> Many of these issues have periodically resurfaced or persisted.<sup>67</sup> Even Russia's elite troops performed poorly, with some of its premier units suffering significant casualties. Like Ukraine, Russia has experienced ammunition shortages, compelling it to seek assistance from foreign partners.

NATO continues to seek to deter Russia by denial. After Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, NATO allies reinforced the existing battlegroups and agreed to establish four additional multinational battlegroups in Bulgaria, Hungary, Romania, and Slovakia. This increased the total number of multinational battlegroups to eight, effectively doubling the number of troops on the ground and extending NATO's forward presence along the alliance's eastern flank, from the Baltic Sea in the north to the Black Sea in the south. NATO allies also pledged to increase the size of multinational battlegroups to brigade-sized units, and a German brigade has already been established in Lithuania. The US Army and NATO recently launched a new defense initiative, the Eastern Flank Deterrence Line, to enhance NATO's ground-based capabilities.<sup>68</sup> A central aspect of the plan is enhancing interoperability among NATO partners. The US Army aims to develop a standardized launcher capable of both offensive and defensive operations, along with a fire control system that can be used across member nations. Some Russian military thinkers maintain that these plans along with plans to continue providing military assistance and intelligence support as Kyiv attacked its nuclear facilities are a signal of growing willingness by the West to enter into a conflict with Russia.<sup>69</sup>

As the Russian military continues to face attrition in Ukraine, Russian military thinkers continue to express concern about a Kaliningrad blockade contingency.<sup>70</sup> This concern has been fueled by Lithuania's sanction enforcement in 2022, in which Vilnius prohibited the transit of Russian goods that were subject to EU sanctions through its territory, citing a European Commission decision it claimed it was obligated to enforce. The issue was resolved

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<sup>66</sup> Mykhaylo Zabrotskyi et al., "Preliminary Lessons in Conventional Warfighting from Russia's Invasion of Ukraine: February–July 2022," RUSI, 2022, <https://www.rusi.org/explore-our-research/publications/special-resources/preliminary-lessons-conventional-warfighting-russias-invasion-ukraine-february-july-2022>.

<sup>67</sup> Michael Kofman, "Assessing Russian Military Adaptation in 2023," Carnegie Endowment, 2024, <https://carnegieendowment.org/research/2024/10/assessing-russian-military-adaptation-in-2023?lang=en>; Michael Kofman, Rob Lee, and Dara Massicot, "Hold, Build, and Strike: A Vision for Rebuilding Ukraine's Advantage in 2024," *War on The Rocks*, <https://warontherocks.com/2024/01/hold-build-and-strike-a-vision-for-rebuilding-ukraines-advantage-in-2024/>.

<sup>68</sup> Cyril Barabaltchouk, "NATO Can Take Kaliningrad Down Faster Than Ever, US General Donahue Says," *United 24*, 2025, <https://united24media.com/latest-news/nato-can-take-kaliningrad-down-faster-than-ever-us-general-donahue-says-10012>.

<sup>69</sup> Kolesnikov and Kruglov, "On New Military Dangers and Threats to Russia"; Bartosh, "Factors of Surprise Yesterday and Today."

<sup>70</sup> Barabaltchouk, "NATO Can Take Kaliningrad Down Faster Than Ever."

when Vilnius removed rail transit restrictions, but for the Russian military-analytical community, the resolution did not inspire confidence.

Some Russian military thinkers suggested it was a partial blockade. Following these events, Kolesnikov and Kruglov wrote that a provocation such as transport restrictions on Kaliningrad, along with NATO's military buildup on its eastern and Nordic flanks, constituted "an operation that prepares the armed forces of these countries to unleash military conflicts with Russia and the Republic of Belarus."<sup>71</sup> In other words, NATO is covertly preparing for a nuclear war against Russia, according to these authors.

In addition, Russian military thinkers appear to be concerned about US missile deployments in Scandinavia and Eastern Europe, a development rooted in long-standing anxieties. According to Kostyukov, Finland would be the ideal location to deploy US strike assets, such as the High Mobility Artillery Rocket System and Army Tactical Missile System, to hit critical objects in the northern and western parts of Russia.<sup>72</sup> This fear also appears to be rooted in Russian operational assumptions during the past 10 years, the symbolism of the spread of US strike assets in the region, and the planning scenario of a massed air-space attack.

In proposed solutions to these fears, military thinkers mainly advise Russia to continue to invest in its own conventional forces. For instance, Admiral Moiseyev proposed that Russia increase the offensive and defensive capabilities of the fleet to confront the adversary (gaining dominance in the central and eastern parts) to reliably defend Kaliningrad, ensure transport accessibility, grant the Baltic fleet the ability to land sea-assault forces on an operational scale, and maintain a presence of surface ships equipped with long-range precision strike weapons in the waters of Ladoga and Onega. He also noted the possibility of strengthening the Baltic Fleet through interfleet (intertheater) maneuvers of naval forces along inland waterways and the development of the industrial base in the St. Petersburg and Leningrad regions.<sup>73</sup> In addition, Kostyukov suggested the authorities act prudently when it comes to the creation of the new Moscow and Leningrad military districts announced by President Putin in early 2024 to counter Finland's NATO accession.<sup>74</sup>

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<sup>71</sup> Kolesnikov and Kruglov, "On New Military Dangers and Threats to Russia."

<sup>72</sup> Kostyukov, "NATO's Military Activities as the Main Source of Military Threat to Russia."

<sup>73</sup> Moiseyev, "Strategic Requirements for the Development of the Navy Potential of Russia."

<sup>74</sup> Kostyukov, "NATO's Military Activities as the Main Source of Military Threat to Russia."

## Nonnuclear capabilities and missile defense

Much has been written about Russian military concerns about the development US nonnuclear capabilities, particularly hypersonic systems, and the potential for their combined use. Russian analysts have generally argued that such capabilities could enable a “prompt global strike” against Russian C2 infrastructure and other critical assets. US analysts and the military usually refer to PGS as a capability that would enhance its long-range strike capability so that it can strike anywhere in the world with forces that are based in or near the US, or with forces that have the range to reach targets across the globe from wherever they are deployed.<sup>75</sup> A wide range of Russian strategic documents from the past 10 years deem the development of this capability as a threat.

Russia’s 2014 military doctrine emphasizes the necessity of maintaining its strategic deterrence capability and explicitly identifies the threats to this deterrent:

[These threats are] the creation and deployment of global strategic antiballistic missile systems that undermine the established global stability and balance of power in nuclear missile capabilities, the implementation of the “prompt strike” concept, the intent to deploy weapons in space, and the deployment of strategic conventional precision weapons.<sup>76</sup>

According to an article by Kristin Ven Bruusgaard, this is because Russian strategists perceived a shift in the conventional military balance between Russia and the West. Russia’s 2014 invasion of Ukraine demonstrated its improved conventional capabilities, prompting NATO to reinforce its military posture from the Barents to the Baltic and Black Seas.<sup>77</sup> In response, Russian strategists voiced growing concern over NATO’s expanding presence on multiple fronts while still recognizing Russia’s disadvantage in a prolonged conventional conflict. Thus, Russian strategy documents continued to list NATO capabilities, the US PGS program, and US-led BMD capabilities as major threats because they were considered to undermine Russian damage infliction.<sup>78</sup>

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<sup>75</sup> Amy F. Woolf, *Conventional Prompt Global Strike and Long-Range Ballistic Missiles: Background and Issues*, Congressional Research Services, 2021, [https://www.congress.gov/crs\\_external\\_products/R/PDF/R41464/R41464.51.pdf](https://www.congress.gov/crs_external_products/R/PDF/R41464/R41464.51.pdf).

<sup>76</sup> President of Russia, *The Military Doctrine of the Russian Federation*.

<sup>77</sup> Ven Bruusgaard, “Russian Nuclear Strategy and Conventional Inferiority.”

<sup>78</sup> President of Russia, *Foundations of State Policy of the Russian Federation in the Area of Nuclear Deterrence*, Translated by CNA Russia Studies Program, DIM-2020-U-027358-1Rev, 2020, <https://www.cna.org/reports/2020/06/state-policy-of-russia-toward-nuclear-deterrence>; President of Russia, *Fundamentals of State Policy of the Russian Federation on Nuclear Deterrence*, 2024, [https://www.mid.ru/en/foreign\\_policy/international\\_safety/regprla/1434131/?lang=ru](https://www.mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/international_safety/regprla/1434131/?lang=ru); Adamsky, *The Russian Way of Deterrence*.

Because the assumptions have not changed, this language is also in the 2024 Fundamentals of the State Policy of the Russian Federation in the Area of Nuclear Deterrence, which notes that the “possession and deployment by a potential adversary of missile defense systems and assets, intermediate- and shorter-range cruise and ballistic missiles, high-precision non-nuclear and hypersonic weapons, unmanned combat vehicles of various basing modes, and directed energy weapons that can be used against the Russian Federation” represent a danger that may evolve into a threat.<sup>79</sup>

Russian thinkers, in fact, perceive the conventional military balance to their disadvantage. In 2023, Yuriy Podgornykh, Valentin Dybov, and Maxim Kolodko from the Military Academy of Aerospace Defense wrote that the real threat to Russia continues to be the development of a global strike system and the prospect of a massed air-space attack by the US and its allies during the initial period of war. For them, the main threat was the US and NATO emphasis on air and space attack systems as central to modern warfare.<sup>80</sup> They highlighted the prioritization of long-range precision weapons, hypersonic systems, advanced cruise missiles, UAVs, electronic warfare, and emerging technologies. They also pointed to the development of offensive concepts such as “global strike,” “multidomain battle,” and “space-based attacks.”

In addition, this group of authors argued that Russian leadership should focus on preparing for a large-scale aerospace attack by deceiving the enemy and developing modern intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR) capabilities to counter a surprise attack. They also emphasized the need to enhance the destructive power and precision of Russia’s weapons, noting that “this alone heightens operational and tactical surprise.”<sup>81</sup> In addition, they advised political leaders to move away from publicizing weapons advancements and instead prioritize strategic deception.

Proposals to counter the missile defense and conventional prompt strike programs can generally be categorized into two groups. Some propose that Russia improve its missile defense capabilities.<sup>82</sup> For example, in 2022, A. Ulanovsky, writing in *Armeiski Sbornik*, warned that stagnation in strategic weapons development and insufficient countermeasures to the advancing global strike program could leave Russia vulnerable to “unacceptable damage” to its

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<sup>79</sup> President of Russia, *Fundamentals of State Policy of the Russian Federation on Nuclear Deterrence*.

<sup>80</sup> Yuriy Podgornykh, Valentin Dybov, and Maxim Kolodko, “Intelligence Reported—the Analysis Failed [Разведка доложила – анализ подкачал],” *Nezavisimoe voennoe obozrenie*, no. 3 (2023), [https://nvo.ng.ru/concepts/2023-03-02/1\\_1226\\_factor.html](https://nvo.ng.ru/concepts/2023-03-02/1_1226_factor.html).

<sup>81</sup> Podgornykh, Dybov, and Kolodko, “Intelligence Reported—the Analysis Failed.”

<sup>82</sup> V. Krasnoslobodtsev et al., “Strategic Missile Defense System of the Russian Federation and the United States, Comparative Analysis and Development Prospectus [Стратегическая система противоракетной обороны Российской Федерации и США, сравнительный анализ и перспективы развития],” *Strategic Stability* 106, no. 1 (2024).

administrative and industrial centers.<sup>83</sup> To mitigate this risk, he called for greater investment in Russian missile defense. According to the article, innovations allow Russia to establish a flexible, mobile missile defense system, deployable anywhere within its territory, or, if necessary, on the territory of allies or friendly states during an escalation of the military-political situation. He also emphasized the need to recruit and train a new generation of scientists in anticipation of a future arms race. This viewpoint is consistent with Russia's 2014 military doctrine, which states that Russia will oppose the efforts of others to "attain military superiority" by deploying missile defenses, space weapons, or strategic conventional precision weapons.<sup>84</sup> But these concerns are also part of a longer Soviet tradition of thought about a large-scale attack by offensive missiles.<sup>85</sup>

Other experts echoed the importance of strategic modernization in response to the threats posed by the development of US BMD and PGS programs, advocating continued investment in the Strategic Missile Forces and the enhancement of ballistic missile destructive power and technological sophistication. For example, in May 2022, Sukhorutchenko and Colonel S. V. Kreydin argued that Russian technologies designed to counter US missile defense are the most effective means of ensuring the limitation of this US capability.<sup>86</sup> They also proposed negotiating keep-out zones for the US and allied missile defense systems.

Most Russians continue to perceive a technological imbalance between Russia and the West as the fear of a shooting war with NATO persists.<sup>87</sup> Based on Russia's experience in Ukraine, Russian military thinkers now seem to have a clearer understanding of the capabilities NATO could use to reduce the effectiveness of Russian operations, particularly considering Russia's failure to achieve air dominance in Ukraine. Several factors have contributed to the reduced effectiveness of the Russian Aerospace Forces (VKS).<sup>88</sup> A key issue has been the extensive military support provided to Ukraine by NATO and EU countries, including weapons, ammunition, high-precision munitions, UAS, and advanced air defense systems. Foreign and

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<sup>83</sup> A. Ulanovsky, "A New Look for Missile Defense," *Armeiski Sbornik*, no. 8 (2022).

<sup>84</sup> Olikier, *Russia's New Military Doctrine*; President of Russia, *The Military Doctrine of the Russian Federation*; Ryan Christenson, *The Russian Rhetoric: Missile Defense for Me, but Not for Thee*, Lawrence Livermore National Laboratory, 2025, <https://cgsr.llnl.gov/sites/cgsr/files/2025-06/Russian-Rhetoric-Missile-Defense-Me-Not-Thee.pdf>.

<sup>85</sup> David Holloway, "The Strategic Defense Initiative and the Soviet Union," *Daedalus* 114, no. 3 (1985), <https://www.jstor.org/stable/pdf/20024993.pdf?addFooter=false>.

<sup>86</sup> Fink, *The General Staff's Throw-Weight*.

<sup>87</sup> Petersen, Schwartz, and Rosa-Hernandez, *Russian Concepts of Future Warfare*.

<sup>88</sup> S. Dronov, "Features of Aviation Tactics in Modern Combat Operations and Ways to Improve Them Особенности тактики авиации в современных боевых действиях и пути ее совершенствования," *Military Thought*, no. 1 (2024).

domestic air defense systems employed by Ukraine have proven highly effective. In addition, the Russian military admits it underestimated the number of high-precision weapons, guided missiles, and aerial bombs required for offensive operations and to counter enemy air defenses, both before and during the conflict. Ukrainian UAS have also been used successfully to strike VKS assets at airfields, including those located inside Russian territory. Compounding these challenges, VKS has faced persistent issues with its aircraft identification systems, which have hampered operational effectiveness, according to Colonel General S. Dronov.<sup>89</sup>

Moreover, the US and NATO have made effective use of aerial and space-based reconnaissance, while Russia's own reconnaissance capabilities have been limited, notably in detecting the movements of Ukrainian forces, according to Russian military thinkers. This lack of sufficient reconnaissance and intelligence support has further weakened the operational capabilities of the VKS. Russian military analysts are increasingly concerned about the growth of Western ISR capabilities because NATO prioritizes the integration of high-precision weaponry with real-time reconnaissance. V. Orlyanski, Gerasimov, and S. N. Rudenko highlighted that the armed forces of the US and its allies possess a wide range of specialized manned reconnaissance aircraft in their air forces.<sup>90</sup>

The same group of authors also pointed out NATO's large-scale effort to enhance reconnaissance through the Alliance Ground Surveillance program, which has increased reconnaissance flights near Russia's borders. The authors argue that this expanded use of intelligence systems by potential adversaries significantly raises the threat level because the combination of reconnaissance and precision strike capabilities enables NATO to detect and destroy targets in real time across the entire depth of enemy operational formations.

Russian military thinkers have also highlighted an intensifying threat from NATO's naval capabilities. Evmenov, former Commander-in-Chief of the Russian Navy, highlighted the growing threat posed by NATO naval forces, particularly submarine-launched cruise missiles and carrier-based aviation.<sup>91</sup> He emphasized that these capabilities endanger critical Russian targets that lie beyond the reach of Russia's air- and ground-based defenses. His successor, Moiseyev, expanded on this concern, identifying the permanent deployment of large NATO

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<sup>89</sup> Dronov, "Features of Aviation Tactics in Modern Combat Operations and Ways to Improve Them."

<sup>90</sup> Orlyansky, Gerasimov, and Bitner, "Problems of Maneuvering Troops Under Conditions of Use of Modern Intelligence Systems"; Orlyansky, Gerasimov, and Rudenko, "The Problem of Maneuvering Troops in Conditions of the Enemy's Use of Modern Reconnaissance Systems."

<sup>91</sup> Yevmenov, "Main Trends of Change the Nature and Content of the Military Threats to the Russian Federation from Ocean and Sea Directions"; N. A. Yevmenov, "The Character of Armed Struggle at Sea and the Tendency of its Development [Характер вооруженной борьбы на море и тенденции ее развития]," *Military Thought*, no. 12 (2023); N. A. Yevmenov, "Fight Against Unmanned Aerial Vehicles in the Armed Forces [Борьба с беспилотными летательными аппаратами в силах (войсках) Военно-Морского Флота]," *Military Thought*, no. 10 (2024).

naval forces in maritime areas near Russian territory as a significant military risk.<sup>92</sup> These forces, he noted, are equipped with long-range precision weapons, including strategic nonnuclear sea-based systems, along with ships as part of the strategic missile defense system; reconnaissance, patrol, and strike aircraft; and a range of robotic platforms.

Finally, Russian military thinkers ironically appear to be concerned by systems previously covered by the INF Treaty, including the potential deployment of these assets in the eastern flank. However, these concerns have been present since the dissolution of the INF Treaty. Russia's 2020 "Foundations of State Policy of the Russian Federation in the Area of Nuclear Deterrence" noted that the "deployment by states that consider the Russian Federation as a potential adversary of systems and means of missile defense, cruise and ballistic missiles of medium and short range" was considered a military danger that could evolve into a threat.<sup>93</sup> This verbiage was also preserved in the 2024 update of the document.

As a result, Russian military thinkers continue to discuss the threats posed by these systems in a rapidly evolving threat environment.<sup>94</sup> For instance, Major General A. G. Semenov contended in 2023 that the initial phase of a large-scale conflict with NATO would involve a strategically defensive aerospace campaign aimed at thwarting NATO's objectives.<sup>95</sup> According to Semenov, these objectives would encompass a strategic decapitation and disarming strike on Russia. His article directly acknowledges that intermediate-range ballistic missiles from eastern Europe and submarine-launched ballistic missile (SLBMs) to the same targets, along with hypersonic aircraft, would complicate Russia's ability to deliver a retaliatory meeting-strike.

Nonetheless, the second phase of a large-scale conflict with NATO would essentially become a continental war involving general-purpose forces. According to Semenov, primary operations in this phase would occur on land and at sea, relying on traditional forms and methods of combat typical of these domains.

Russia's military experience in Ukraine has been marked by grueling battles of attrition.<sup>96</sup> As a result, Russian military thinkers are increasingly concerned about the widespread use of UAVs

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<sup>92</sup> Moiseyev, "Strategic Requirements for the Development of the Navy Potential of Russia."

<sup>93</sup> President of Russia, *Foundations of State Policy of the Russian Federation in the Area of Nuclear Deterrence*.

<sup>94</sup> V. V. Sukhorutchenko, A. S. Borisenko, and E. A. Shlotov, "Russian Federation Policies in the Area of Assuring Military Security in the Environment of Stagnation of the International-Legal System of Control over the Armed Forces and Military Activities [Политика Российской Федерации в области обеспечения военной безопасности в условиях стагнации международно-правовой системы контроля над вооружениями и военной деятельностью]," *Military Thought*, no. 5 (2023).

<sup>95</sup> A. G. Semenov, Yu. V. Krinitsky, and V. G. Chekhovsky, "Armed Struggle in the Aerospace Theater of Military Operations [Вооруженная борьба на воздушно-космическом театре военных действий]," *Military Thought*, no. 1 (2023).

<sup>96</sup> Semenov, Krinitsky, and Chekhovsky, "Armed Struggle in the Aerospace Theater of Military Operations."

on the battlefield. According to Orlyansky, Gerasimov, and Rudenko, mass UAV deployment combined with NATO reconnaissance support and the use of air-defense assets has significantly reduced Russia's ability to conduct offensive operations, concentrate forces, and maneuver effectively to secure key positions or areas of confrontation.<sup>97</sup> These authors acknowledge that effective maneuvering is nearly impossible without first neutralizing the enemy's capabilities. Consequently, they advocate for reduced reliance on Russian precision-strike assets and call for the development of a new theory to counter enemy reconnaissance in Ukraine.

## Golden Dome

As previously explained, Russia has long opposed the expansion of US missile defense systems for a variety of reasons. The Golden Dome is conceptualized as a comprehensive, multilayered national defense architecture designed to employ advanced technologies capable of countering ballistic, hypersonic, and next-generation cruise missile threats.<sup>98</sup> Central to its operation will be space-based assets responsible for detecting, tracking, and intercepting hostile missiles. A defining characteristic of the system is the interoperability of its components, enabling seamless integration with existing US missile defense capabilities, including ground-based systems in Alaska and California, the Aegis system deployed on naval vessels, and the Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) and Patriot systems positioned across US and allied territories. Consequently, Pranay Vaddi and John K. Warden argue that despite Russia's offensive capabilities, Moscow is unlikely to seriously consider arms control talks with the United States unless missile defense is on the table.<sup>99</sup>

So far, the official Russian narrative is that Golden Dome contains a destabilizing space component with a declared intention to intercept enemy targets as it rejects the relationship between strategic offensive and strategic defensive weapons.<sup>100</sup> Material published in defense journals appears to be consistent with the idea that threat perceptions regarding Golden Dome are an extension of previous worries concerning US missile defense capabilities. According to most publications, Golden Dome appears to be an ambitious initiative by President Donald Trump that reflects concern about Chinese and Russian cruise missiles (including

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<sup>97</sup> Orlyansky, Gerasimov, and Rudenko, "The Problem of Maneuvering Troops in Conditions of the Enemy's Use of Modern Reconnaissance Systems."

<sup>98</sup> "Ryabkov: The US Golden Dome Project Impedes Arms Control. The Deputy Foreign Minister Noted That It Is Not Only Russia That Sees the Problem in This," *Tass*, June 6, 2025.

<sup>99</sup> Pranay R. Vaddi and John K. Warden, "Golden Dome and Arms Control: Impediment or Opportunity?," *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists* 81, no. 4 (2025), doi: 10.1080/00963402.2025.2518872, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00963402.2025.2518872>.

<sup>100</sup> "Ryabkov: The US Golden Dome Project Impedes Arms Control."

hypersonics).<sup>101</sup> As a result, Russia should continue to invest in strategic offensive systems to overcome missile defense systems despite President Putin's personal relationship with President Trump.

Thinly veiled in these articles is doubt that the goals envisioned for the Golden Dome project are feasible within the proposed timeline. These doubts are a natural continuity of Russian military thinking on US missile defense capabilities, as some Russian military thinkers openly acknowledge that the ability of the Aegis BMD 5.0.1 missile defense system to engage ICBMs is constrained in its current form. For instance, V. Krasnoslobodtsev, A. Raskin, S. Tarazevich, and I. Tarasov from the fourth MOD TsNII (central science research institutes focused on the Strategic Missile Forces) posited that the use of ICBM warheads by SM-3 interceptors is only feasible within a narrowly defined engagement window, requiring launch at a precise time and location.<sup>102</sup> Furthermore, they argued that Aegis radars lack the capability to independently detect targets at the extended ranges necessary for ICBM interception, relying instead on external cueing from fixed early warning radars, a form of support that may not be guaranteed in a high-intensity conflict against a technologically advanced adversary.

## Nuclear weapons

Nuclear weapons are often cited as a “danger” or “threat” in the context of a massive aerospace attack by NATO forces. This continues to be the most common planning scenario in Russian military literature. From the Russian viewpoint, the crucial force correlation involved is NATO's ability to amass forces and carry out conventional precision strikes against key military and economic infrastructure from air and sea, and Russia's ability to counteract and disrupt such an attack.<sup>103</sup> For instance, writers focusing on the Strategic Missile Forces tend to point to the global strike, along with hypersonic weapons, as a significant threat to Russian critical objects because their greatest effect will be when used in a decapitating and disarming strike, according to Russian military thinkers. In 2022, Nogin pointed to the maturity of the global strike program as a key threat to the Strategic Missile Force, but he also notes that the weapons contain advantages and disadvantages.<sup>104</sup> Meanwhile, Kostyukov points out that “a significant danger for Russia lies in the possibility of nuclear employment along with the employment of

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<sup>101</sup> Vladimir Kuzar, “Space Becomes Dangerous [В космосе становится опасно],” *Krasnaia Zvezda*, no. 93 (May 23, 2025); Sergei Nesterov, “A ‘Golden Dome’ for America [«Золотой купол» для Америки],” *Krasnaia Zvezda*, no. 86 (2025).

<sup>102</sup> Krasnoslobodtsev et al., “Strategic Missile Defense System of the Russian Federation and the United States.”

<sup>103</sup> Reach, Kilambi, and Cozad, *Russian Assessments and Applications of the Correlation of Forces and Means*.

<sup>104</sup> Nogin, “Threats to Strategic Missile Forces Facilities from Air and Space Attacks”; Fink, *The General Staff's Throw-Weight*.

precision guided missiles against Russia in the context of the coalition missile defense system reaching a high level of readiness.”<sup>105</sup>

Kostyukov also highlights as a “danger” the increased integration of US nuclear strategy with that of France and the UK. His assessment of the nuclear balance encompasses the strategic forces of Washington, London, and Paris, which is not surprising, considering that Russia has maintained that the UK and France should be included in arms control negotiations if it were to negotiate deeper cuts in its nuclear arsenal.

The Russian military also seems to be concerned about what would happen if Washington were to withdraw from the New START nuclear arms reduction treaty, or what will happen after the agreement expires in 2026. According to Kostyukov, if Washington were to withdraw from New START, it could increase the number of deployed ICBMs, SLBMs, and heavy bombers to 882 deployed systems (450 Minuteman 3, 336 Trident-2 SLBMs, and 96 B-52H and B-2A strategic bombers), and these systems could carry up to 7,222 warheads. In addition, his article points out the technical possibility of reequipping 44 strategic B-1 B8-12 bombers with nuclear warheads, although the US Air Force is decommissioning its B-1B fleet to clear space for B-21s. Russian concerns about more warheads on deployed systems is not surprising, given that the US Air Force has confirmed it is ready to add more nuclear warheads to its bomber aircraft and underground missiles if ordered to do so after the agreement expires.<sup>106</sup>

Others, namely from the Strategic Missile Forces, appear to be concerned about deeper cuts to Russia’s nuclear arsenal. For instance, Nugin of the Strategic Missile Force Academy emphasized the importance of evaluating whether the current force levels are adequate, considering evolving threats and the maturity of US missile defense.<sup>107</sup>

In general, Russian military thinkers seem to share a growing concern about threats to strategic assets in all domains. In 2024, Moiseyev noted that NATO nuclear powers’ concentration of their main strategic nuclear forces (nuclear submarines with ballistic missiles) in sea and ocean areas (zones), especially in the Arctic, represented a “military danger” to Russia.<sup>108</sup> This concern reflects a long-standing aspect of Russian threat perception. For years, some analysts have warned of the possibility of a large-scale aerospace strike

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<sup>105</sup> Kostyukov, “NATO’s Military Activities as the Main Source of Military Threat to Russia.”

<sup>106</sup> John A. Tirpak and Rachel S. Cohen, “Air Force Ready to Deploy More Nukes Once Arms Control Treaty Ends,” Air and Space Forces, 2025, <https://www.airandspaceforces.com/air-force-ready-to-deploy-more-nukes-once-arms-control-treaty-ends/>.

<sup>107</sup> Fink, *The General Staff’s Throw-Weight*.

<sup>108</sup> Moiseyev, “Strategic Requirements for the Development of the Navy Potential of Russia.”

originating from the Arctic, carried out by a technologically superior adversary. In addition, the Arctic is seen as potentially critical to the future of the US BMD system.<sup>109</sup>

As a result, protecting Russia's strategic submarines and their operational zones remains a top priority for the Northern Fleet. To ensure Russia's ability to carry out a retaliatory strike, Moiseyev has recommended establishing dominance in the Arctic.<sup>110</sup> This would involve significantly strengthening the Northern Fleet's offensive and defensive capabilities, including restoring naval missile-carrying aviation and extensively equipping its forces with high-precision weapons

As in the West, Russian military thinkers also appear to be concerned about the erosion of the nuclear taboo despite Russia's routine nuclear threats. American nonstrategic nuclear weapons stationed in Europe continue to be a concern for the Russian military because of their asymmetry, among other reasons, but far less so than strategic nonnuclear and nuclear capabilities. Moiseyev notes that Russia sees Western discussions about bringing tactical nuclear weapons and their delivery systems to full combat readiness as a "danger," citing low-yield nuclear weapons and the possibility of a threshold decrease for nuclear employment. In addition, at least one Russian military analyst lamented the future deployment of the F-35A Lightning II.<sup>111</sup> Other writings focus on the prospect of certain countries in the eastern flank hosting nuclear weapons as a potential threat.

In a way, Russian fears about the nuclear threshold of its adversaries mirror those of the West. After all, the concern over tactical nuclear weapons is further compounded by the potential for their early use in a conflict, which adds another layer of complexity to Russia's strategic calculations. Kostyukov highlights that nothing prevents NATO members from employing tactical nuclear weapons at the initial stage of a potential conflict with Russia. However, he inserts some caveats into his discussion regarding US tactical nuclear weapons, writing that despite the low probability of a preemptive nuclear strike against Russia, such a scenario should be considered "one of the threat-forming factors for Russia."<sup>112</sup>

Despite rhetoric from Russian leadership claiming that Russia finds itself in a hot war with NATO in Ukraine, Kostyukov views the possibility of direct aggression against Russia by NATO in the near or medium term as a highly unlikely prospect. Nonetheless, he and other Russian military thinkers generally advocate for Russian leadership to take steps to counter the long-

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<sup>109</sup> Kartazyna Zysk, *Russia's Military Build-Up in the Arctic: To What End?*, CNA, IOP-2020-U-027998-Final, 2020, <https://www.cna.org/analyses/2020/09/russian-military-in-the-arctic>.

<sup>110</sup> Moiseyev, "Strategic Requirements for the Development of the Navy Potential of Russia."

<sup>111</sup> Bartosh, "Factors of Surprise Yesterday and Today"; Bartosh, "Deterrence Takes Other Forms"; Bartosh, "A Punishing Sword in the Hands of Russia"; Bartosh, "The US and NATO Are on the Warpath."

<sup>112</sup> Kostyukov, "NATO's Military Activities as the Main Source of Military Threat to Russia."

term plans of the US and its allies. These steps mainly involve ways to bolster nuclear deterrence with dual-capable weapons, including the use of hypersonic weapons and investment in maneuverable strategies to evade and defend against potential enemy strikes.

## Space threats

Russian military doctrine acknowledges space as a warfighting domain and emphasizes that maintaining access to space-based military information while denying it to the adversary is crucial for winning modern wars.<sup>113</sup> Naturally, even before the war, Russian military theorists claimed that several factors were motivating Russia to enhance its space capabilities. These factors include actions by the US and other countries to militarize space; the increasing threat of cyberattacks against Russian satellites, particularly Russia's early-warning constellation; the evolution and rapid advancement of counterspace weapons systems; and the growing potential to deploy weapons in space for use against terrestrial targets.<sup>114</sup>

In Russian strategic thinking, the timing of space operations is crucial. Both offensive (counterspace) and defensive space activities play a significant role at the outset of a conflict. During this early phase, it is expected that both sides will attempt to launch what Russia refers to as an "information strike" aimed at disrupting the opponent's command, control, communications, computers, intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (C4ISR) abilities.<sup>115</sup> Russian fears about the West's C4ISR capabilities have not subsided since Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine. As a matter of fact, Russian military thinkers assert that the Russian military's experience in going against these capabilities due to Ukraine's access to Western reconnaissance support confirms their initial concerns about the role of C4ISR as a key enabler in precision strikes.<sup>116</sup>

For them, the participation of Western commercial space firms such as SpaceX, Maxar Technologies, Planet Labs, and BlackSky have played a crucial role in supporting Ukraine's C4ISR-T (Targeting) capabilities during the conflict.<sup>117</sup> For instance, a study by Orlyanski,

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<sup>113</sup> President of Russia, *The Military Doctrine of the Russian Federation*.

<sup>114</sup> Michael Connell, *The Role of Space in Russia's Operations in Ukraine*, CNA, IOP-2023-U-035989-1Rev, 2023, <https://www.cna.org/reports/2023/11/Role-of-Space-in-Russias-Operations-in-Ukraine.pdf>.

<sup>115</sup> Connell, *The Role of Space in Russia's Operations in Ukraine*.

<sup>116</sup> V. Krasnoslobodtsev et al., "Military Space Activity of Russia at Various Stages of the Development of Military Affairs [Военно-космическая деятельность России на различных этапах развития военного дела]," *Strategic Stability* 102, no. 1 (2023); Orlyansky, Gerasimov, and Bitner, "Problems of Maneuvering Troops Under Conditions of Use of Modern Intelligence Systems"; Orlyansky, Gerasimov, and Rudenko, "The Problem of Maneuvering Troops in Conditions of the Enemy's Use of Modern Reconnaissance Systems."

<sup>117</sup> Connell, *The Role of Space in Russia's Operations in Ukraine*.

Gerasimov, and Rudenko emphasizes that the Starlink system enables near-continuous battlefield surveillance, allowing enemy forces to monitor Russian troop movements across their formations and strike in real time.<sup>118</sup> The authors note that the US and its allies routinely use civilian space systems to support Ukraine during Russia's full-scale invasion, providing rapid situational awareness and response. In 2023, Krasnoslobodtsev, Y. Kuzmin, T. Petrukhina, Raskin, and Tarasov from the fourth Russian MOD Central Scientific Research Institute (TsNII) echoed this sentiment and highlighted Starlink's compatibility with reconnaissance and strike UAS.<sup>119</sup> According to this group of authors, these capabilities will only grow with the second generation of Starlink.

Russian military thinkers also perceive that the focus of other states on small spacecraft operating in low orbits could cause a series of issues for Russia's own employment of space-related capabilities. In 2025, E. A. Shlotov, Borisenko, and Sukhorutchenko argued that the growing number of small spacecraft and the increasing congestion of near-Earth orbit pose new threats to Russia's security, as outlined in their critique of official doctrinal documents.<sup>120</sup> They warned that this trend could lead to energy (information) interference with space control systems and reduce the safety of military and dual-use space missions, increasing the risk of collisions with satellites or space debris. In addition, several articles identified the US X-37B, an uncrewed autonomous spacecraft, as a potential threat due to its possible military applications since it could form a possible orbital reconnaissance-strike system.<sup>121</sup>

It is important to note that even though some Russian military thinkers perceive growing threats from space, they do not perceive them as impenetrable. According to Orlyanski, E. V. Bitner, and Rudenko, countering adversary reconnaissance should be a multistep and comprehensive process. At the strategic level, this involves anti-satellite operations and combating strategic air intelligence.<sup>122</sup> They suggest employing Russia's ground-based systems that could blind sensors, such as the Peresvet laser weapon and its BMD complex, against adversary satellites. In addition, the authors consider hypersonic and radio frequency weapons as effective methods to neutralize space- and air-based reconnaissance systems. Other

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<sup>118</sup> Orlyansky, Gerasimov, and Bitner, "Problems of Maneuvering Troops Under Conditions of Use of Modern Intelligence Systems"; Orlyansky, Gerasimov, and Rudenko, "The Problem of Maneuvering Troops in Conditions of the Enemy's Use of Modern Reconnaissance Systems."

<sup>119</sup> Krasnoslobodtsev et al., "Military Space Activity of Russia at Various Stages of the Development of Military Affairs."

<sup>120</sup> Shlotov, Borisenko, and Sukhorutchenko, "Identification of the Main Threats to the Military Security of the Russian Federation."

<sup>121</sup> V. Krasnoslobodtsev et al., "Is the X-37B a Space Drone Explorer or Fighter? [X-37B – Космический беспилотный исследователь или боец?]," *Strategic Stability*, no. 2 (2025).

<sup>122</sup> Orlyansky, Gerasimov, and Bitner, "Problems of Maneuvering Troops Under Conditions of Use of Modern Intelligence Systems."

hypothetical approaches in their view include creating a shielding cloud between the terrestrial and space components of the Starlink system, disrupting communications and control through electronic warfare, disabling spacecraft optoelectronic systems with laser weapons, and physically targeting spacecraft, ground control stations, and support systems of space constellations, regardless of their location.

More importantly, the Russian military generally agrees that Russia generally needs to address gaps in its own space capabilities. A group of authors from the fourth TsNII noted that Russian parity was no longer enough to meet threats from space posed by adversaries, but they argued that Russia should strive to maintain its forces at a level that prevents the adversary from achieving dominance in several areas at once.<sup>123</sup>

To address these challenges, the authors argue that Russia must continue developing space systems that ensure the effective use of nuclear weapons and troop formations in wartime conditions. Key priorities include establishing rapid-response orbital launch capabilities, building multisatellite systems based on small spacecraft, and leveraging space assets to fully support ground and naval forces. They also call for the advancement of research programs aimed at countering adversary spacecraft and disrupting space-based combat support for enemy forces, as well as the intensified use of dual-purpose space systems. On a more foundational level, experts from the fourth TsNII and Shlotov et al. from the 27th TsNII recommend formally recognizing space as a domain of armed conflict and revising national legal and policy frameworks to more clearly define space-related threats and guide the development of appropriate countermeasures.<sup>124</sup>

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<sup>123</sup> Krasnoslobodtsev et al., "Military Space Activity of Russia at Various Stages of the Development of Military Affairs."

<sup>124</sup> Krasnoslobodtsev et al., "Military Space Activity of Russia at Various Stages of the Development of Military Affairs"; Shlotov, Borisenko, and Sukhorutchenko, "Identification of the Main Threats to the Military Security of the Russian Federation."

## Conclusion

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Even though Russian forces have shown signs of operational ingenuity in Ukraine, Russia's war on Ukraine has not led to new perspectives on Russian threat perceptions. Although some military thinkers discuss new aspects of traditional threats, these conversations appear to be an extension of previous worries. Overall, Russia's military experience in Ukraine has intensified and sharpened its former concerns.

The drivers for the lack of new perspectives on Russian threat perceptions could be multifold. First, how Russia understands internal and external threats and dangers to its security has not changed. Second, given the attrition of its military in Ukraine, Russian theorists implicitly perceive Russia to be even more disadvantaged than before in terms of the conventional military balance vis-à-vis NATO. Conversations about significant threats from the US and NATO are still linked primarily to the scenario of a massive aerospace attack. Third, Russian military thinkers do not appear to have changed their assumptions about what a NATO-Russia conflict would look like. The main mitigations proposed include Russia focusing on its strategic nuclear and nonnuclear offensive capabilities and continuing to develop its own missile defense and space capabilities.

The substantial military assistance provided to Ukraine by the US and its allies, viewed by Russian military thinkers as part of a broader strategy to weaken Russia, highlights the rise of the view that Russia must prepare for proxy wars. In Russian military-analytical thought, the internal and external security situations continue to be coupled. This perception may lead to increased Russian efforts to counter Western influence in other regions, and Russia might engage in signaling efforts to the West because of domestic turmoil in Russia or states it perceives to be in its sphere of influence.

As the Russian military fights in Ukraine, Russia maintains that it now has a better sense of NATO's collective capabilities. Faced with attrition and insecurity about the nation's force posture in the Baltic and Black seas, Russian military thinkers continue to adhere to the belief that NATO military activities pose a threat to Russia's security, and they expand upon which activities constitute a "danger" to its security. The participation of Western commercial space firms in supporting Ukraine has reinforced Russian fears about the role of space in modern warfare. To address these challenges, Russian military thinkers advocate for developing space systems that ensure the effective use of nuclear weapons and troop formations, establishing rapid-response orbital launch capabilities, and leveraging space assets to support ground and naval forces.

Despite discussions and debates about new trends in warfare, the Russian military continues to fixate on the potential for a "prompt global strike" against Russian C2 infrastructure as well

as US BMD capabilities, viewing both as a significant threat to their strategic deterrence capabilities. Russian military-analytical thinking about the Golden Dome project is consistent with previous patterns of thought regarding US BMD capabilities. There is skepticism among Russian military analysts about feasibility of the Golden Dome project within the proposed timeline. Regardless, Russian military thinkers advocate for continued investment in strategic offensive systems to overcome missile defense systems.

Although Russia's military remains a capable force, Russia's war on Ukraine has exposed the divergence between Russian thinking about operational art and the actual state of its military. As a result, when interpreting the proposals of how Russian military thinkers believe threats should be mitigated, analysts, along with Western policy-makers, should be aware of the gap between concepts and reality.

The Russian military recognizes inherent dangers in a deterrence-based global security order. When discussing threats, Russian sources tend to stress the dangers of escalation that could lead to the use of nuclear weapons. Indeed, stressing the dangers of escalation may be an effort to convince Western states to end their support for Ukraine, but implicitly, Russian military thinkers admit that the fear of nuclear escalation. This does not imply that a conventional conflict between NATO members and Russia is completely inconceivable. Instead, it suggests that for such a conflict to occur, each party must either decide whether they are willing to risk nuclear escalation or believe that they can engage in a conventional war without risking such escalation.

For the Russian military, their fears of the 2000s that the US and NATO are actively attempting to undermine Russian security have been realized. The unwavering focus on these threats despite significant geopolitical changes suggests a deep-rooted mistrust and a belief in the inevitability of long-term confrontation with the West. This persistent perception may hinder diplomatic efforts and contribute to a prolonged period of geopolitical instability, with both sides preparing for potential conflicts. More importantly, regardless of how and when Russia's war on Ukraine ends, Russian leaders will have to make difficult decisions to restructure their nation's conventional and nuclear forces resulting from perceived threats.

## Abbreviations

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BMD	ballistic missile defense
C2	command and control
C4ISR	command, control, communications, computers, intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance
COFM	correlation of forces and means
EU	European Union
ICBM	intercontinental ballistic missile
INF	Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces
ISR	intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance
MOD	Ministry of Defense
NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Organization
PGS	Prompt Global Strike
SLBM	submarine-launched ballistic missile
TsNII	Russian MOD Central Scientific Research Institute
UAS	unmanned aerial system
UAV	unmanned aerial vehicle
VKS	Russian Aerospace Forces
VM	<i>Voyennaya Mysl</i> [ <i>Military Thought</i> ]
VPO	<i>voenno-politicheskaia obstanovka</i> [military-political situation]
THAAD	Terminal High Altitude Area Defense

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