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The widening scope of Russia's hybrid war against Europe suggests that the Kremlin has great confidence that its existing nuclear advantage allows it to manage escalation dynamics better than NATO – and collect the resulting strategic dividends. If so, the central challenge facing the Alliance is not limited to improving its defensive resilience. Rather it is to undermine the belief that escalation works to Russia's advantage. If NATO capitals wish to reinstate strategic restraint in Moscow, they must ensure that Russian leaders once again have compelling reasons to fear escalation.

Introduction

In recent months European leaders have become increasingly concerned about aggressive Russian behaviour below the threshold of armed conflict. Most notably, this concern related to the exponential increase of drone sightings nearby military installations or other critical infrastructure across the continent. Yet this trend aligned with a broader and pre-existing pattern of security incidents in which attribution is often difficult to prove, but of which the scale is so significant that the involvement of a hostile state actor is evident. This pattern included for example cyber-attacks, airspace violations, disinformation operations, arson, assassination plots, the cutting of subsea cables and other forms of attempted sabotage. Many have already described this as hybrid warfare, the character of which has been perfected by the Russian Federation in its longstanding quest to upend the Euro-Atlantic security architecture.¹

This policy brief analyses Russia's ongoing hybrid war through the prism of deterrence and escalation dynamics. Russia's appetite for taking ever more escalatory steps below the threshold of armed conflict is most likely grounded in a high degree of confidence in its own theory of victory in case of war with NATO. In turn, this confidence is anchored in both a material advantage in the realm of non-strategic nuclear capabilities and the Kremlin's belief that the willingness to escalate can be used as a source of competitive advantage. Such an analysis implies that NATO capitals cannot fundamentally address this hybrid threat simply by increasing their own defence and resilience. Rather, the deeper challenge is to undermine Russia's own confidence in its escalation-centric theory of victory. In other words, NATO must seek to make Russia fear escalation again if it wants the ongoing hybrid war to stop.

This argument proceeds in three parts. First, Russia's ongoing hybrid war must be understood as a problem resulting from a partial failure of deterrence. Whilst NATO's deterrence has been successful in making the Russian Federation wary about engaging in a conventional military conflict tailored to NATO's competitive advantages, it also prompted Russia refine its strategy for challenging the West. Second, Russia's willingness to escalate – both above and below the threshold of NATO's Article 5 – is grounded in its own theory of victory. The latter carefully integrates covert activities with preparations for both conventional and nuclear conflict. As Russia seems to be confident about its ability to dominate and control limited nuclear exchanges, it is unfazed by the risk of conventional conflict, and therefore altogether unbound below the threshold of armed conflict. Third comes the question what NATO can do to turn this strategically unenviable situation around. Whilst this may require meaningful changes to NATO's deterrence posture, the more fundamental prerequisite is the realisation that successful deterrence critically depends on the political willingness to escalate conflict to a higher level of intensity if need be.

¹ See e.g. Erik Kross and Greg Mills, 'A Frog in a Pot – Turning Around Russia's Hybrid War', *RUSI Commentary*, 22 October 2025, <https://www.rusi.org/explore-our-research/publications/commentary/frog-pot-turning-around-russias-hybrid-war>.

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Russia's hybrid war against Europe as a deterrence failure

Ever since Vladimir Putin's fateful 2007 speech at the Munich Security Conference, so-called 'hybrid threats' blurring the distinction between war and peace have become part and parcel of Russian strategy for upending the Euro-Atlantic security architecture. Conventional wisdom has it that such an indirect approach is the consequence of the nuclear revolution: great powers seek to employ more limited means to pursue their political objectives rather than risk all-out war.² Yet what started as episodic geopolitical harassment has grown over time into a large-scale campaign of hostile activities that is now approaching the threshold of armed conflict. How can this pattern of gradual escalation be explained? Is it still the outcome of successful deterrence, or instead a partial failure of deterrence?

There can be no doubt that Russia's hybrid campaign of ratcheting up pressure on Western capitals to discontinue their support for Ukraine has grown in scope and intensity in recent months. Not only has the number of incidents with suspected or proven Russian involvement been rising rapidly since 2022, so has their severity.³ Especially in the months following the Ukrainian 'Spider Web' attack on Russian airbases using drones as a deep precision strike instrument, sighting of large drones over NATO airbases and military facilities have multiplied. This notably concerned airbases in Belgium, the Netherlands and Germany involved in supporting NATO nuclear operations, with air defenders at Volkel airbase opening fire on drones for the first time on 22 November.⁴ This followed an earlier incident in which Dutch and Polish fighter jets shot down Russian attack drones entering into NATO airspace in the margins of a large-scale bombardment of Ukrainian targets.⁵ The strategic messaging from Moscow was unmistakable: continued support for Ukraine carries risk, and in case of direct conflict key NATO infrastructure is highly vulnerable to drone attacks.

Whilst Moscow's intention to dissuade Western governments from supporting Ukraine by means of all kinds of covert activities is clear, the pattern of gradual escalation reflects an increasingly brazen attitude. Given that such escalation represents an active choice by the Russian leadership, the latter seems to be unfazed about the risks that such escalation entails. Put differently, Russian leaders seem to be quite confident in their ability to manage escalation risks, and in their assessment that NATO capitals will continue to exercise strategic restraint out of concern for escalation. Such assessments are presumably informed not only by their judgement of the relative balance of military capabilities, but also by their view on the asymmetry of political resolve and relative stake in the outcome of the Ukraine war. Rightly or wrongly, Russian leaders believe that NATO must fear escalation more than they do.

Another question is whether Russia's hybrid pressure campaign should be interpreted as a prequel or rather as a substitute for military conflict. In line with the much-vaunted 'Gerasimov doctrine', it has often been assumed that hybrid conflict somehow constituted a new form of warfare.⁶ Yet the gradual expansion of sub-threshold activities corresponds with an under-

² See e.g. Elie Perot, 'The Blurring of War and Peace', *Survival*, 61:2 (2019), pp. 101-110.

³ For a more extensive overview, see Sam Jones, 'Russia's hybrid warfare puts Europe to the test', *Financial Times*, 9 December 2025, <https://www.ft.com/content/2084e87d-d491-4852-8449-f90b73d4788b>.

⁴ See Associated Press, 'Dutch military opens fire at drones over Volkel Air Base', 22 November 2025, <https://apnews.com/article/netherlands-air-base-drones-volkel-3ed1cca6b65f463fee34c60b15565fe0>.

⁵ See the Dutch Ministry of Defence, 'Dutch F-35s shoot down Russian drones over Poland', 10 September 2025, <https://english.defensie.nl/latest/news/2025/09/10/dutch-f-35s-shoot-down-russian-drones-over-poland>.

⁶ Cf. Charles K. Bartles, 'Getting Gerasimov Right', *Military Review*, January-February 2016, pp. 30-38.

standing of war as a phenomenon unfolding across a wide spectrum of escalatory thresholds, each corresponding with an appropriate dosage of force.⁷ In this light, the increasing scope of Russia's hybrid war lays the groundworks for next steps. Not only does the hybrid campaign serve to probe Western defences and collect valuable intelligence for when conventional military operations would begin, it also creates direct effects by raising political awareness about the economic cost of conflict.

Against this background, Russia's ongoing hybrid war against European capitals increasingly appears to reflect a partial failure of deterrence. If Carl von Clausewitz defined war as an act of force to compel the enemy to do one's will, then Moscow is hard at work waging war with unconventional means. This implies that NATO's deterrence posture may have succeeded in convincing the Russian leadership that conventional conflict cannot yield any positive gains but simultaneously failed to restrain Russia's hostile intent and appetite for risk-taking. Even as NATO may appear to Moscow as a conventionally superior foe, Russian leaders still are willing to pursue an escalatory pathway towards armed conflict. In the words of President Putin: "*If Europe wants to wage a war against us and suddenly starts a war with us, we are ready.*"⁸ This begs the question what lies at the root of such self-confidence.

Russia's willingness to escalate as a source of strategic advantage

If the Russian leadership is comfortable authorising actions that increase threat levels for European capitals, such steps must find their place in a Russian theory of victory. Whilst it may be impossible to fully appreciate what this theory of victory may look like, it can be safely assumed that such a construct must encompass at least two basic ingredients, namely a high degree of confidence in Russia's ability to manage the corresponding escalation risks and a strong belief in the positive outcomes of escalation-driven strategic coercion. In essence, Russia must be able to dominate escalation dynamics, and it must have an interest in pursuing escalation because of the political rewards it hopes to gain from doing so.

On the one hand, Russia's self-confidence in approaching escalation dynamics appears to spring from its position of relative advantage in the realm of non-strategic nuclear capabilities. Whilst it is true that a united and undistracted NATO could mobilise a formidable advantage in terms of conventional military power – at least during a conflict that is both short and decisive in outcome – the Russian Federation has pursued the required capabilities for offsetting such a conventional defeat via nuclear escalation.⁹ The wide array of non-strategic nuclear weapons it can launch from dual-capable sea-, air- and land-based delivery systems provides the Russian Federation with a distinct quantitative advantage over NATO's regional-level nuclear deterrence posture. By combat testing various new systems such as the Oreshnik medium-range ballistic missile, Vladimir Putin conveys the message it is illusory to believe

⁷ Cf. Daniela Richterova, Elena Grossfeld, Magda Long & Patrick Bury, 'Russian Sabotage in the Gig-Economy Era', *The RUSI Journal*, 169:5 (2024), 10-21.

⁸ <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/78632>

⁹ See Matthias Eken, Kiran Suman-Chauhan, Beatrice Aubert and Paul van Hooft, 'Understanding Russian strategic culture and the low-yield nuclear threat', Cambridge: RAND Europe, 2025, https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/research_reports/RRA3800/RRA3859-1/RAND_RRA3859-1.pdf.

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“that a strategic defeat can be inflicted upon Russia”.¹⁰ Unsurprisingly, explicit nuclear signalling has featured prominently in the background of Russia’s war against Ukraine.¹¹

At present the Russian Federation can dominate the middle rungs of the escalation ladder, i.e., the levels of conflict above the nuclear threshold but below the level of an all-out nuclear exchange. As a result, it can hope to negate NATO’s conventional force advantage in case of an armed conflict. By extension, it does not have to fear such a confrontation. In Putin’s own words: “Why without fear? Because there are no means of countering such (hypersonic) weapons today.”¹² With the threat of conventional punishment being mitigated by means of the counterthreat of nuclear escalation, the Russian leadership also becomes unbound below the level of armed conflict. Hybrid pressure can be dialled up all the way to just below the Article 5 threshold because it is relatively risk-free in a military sense.

Yet on the other hand, the Russian Federation must not only believe that it can pursue escalation at acceptable risks and costs, but also that escalation offers strategic rewards. Notwithstanding the opaque nature of Russian decision-making, the Kremlin’s growing appetite for escalation – however controlled in a material sense – suggests a belief that it can successfully intimidate Western capitals by leveraging its own willingness to assume greater risk. If NATO capitals believe that Russia is ready to use nuclear weapons, they may well sue for compromise and yield to Russia’s diplomatic claims. Such notions are not unfounded. In a revealing interview on the Tucker Carlson show, for instance, U.S. Special Envoy Steve Witkoff admitted: “Ultimately what you can’t have here is risk of any kind of nuclear action, even the tactical nuclear action.”¹³

Russian behaviour suggests a careful intention to exploit the existing asymmetry of escalation risk acceptance as a source of coercive advantage. Precisely because Western democracies will fret about nuclear escalation risks in a crisis between NATO and Russia, Moscow hopes to leverage its autocratic system of decision-making in the risk-taking competition that is so characteristic of deterrence and escalation dynamics. As peaceful and democratic societies do not relish the prospect of armed conflict, NATO decision-making does tend to be more adverse towards the idea of deliberate escalation. Yet this becomes a competitive disadvantage when confronting a Russian Federation that is far more willing to take more risk in its quest for NATO to yield. To the extent that NATO continues to refrain from addressing this asymmetry in escalation risk acceptance, it paradoxically incentivises the Russian Federation to double down on this strategy and exploit the success thereof.

¹⁰ Vladimir Putin, ‘Statement by the President of the Russian Federation’, Moscow: The Kremlin, 21 November 2024, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/75614>.

¹¹ For a detailed overview, see Liviu Horovitz and Michal Smetana, ‘Russia’s Nuclear Signaling in the War Against Ukraine: A Chronology of the Biden Era’, Berlin: Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik (Research Paper 3, December 2025), https://www.swp-berlin.org/publications/products/arbeitspapiere/Horovitz_Smetana_et_al-Russia_Nuclear_Signalling_Chronology_Dec25_LARGE.pdf

¹² Idem.

¹³ See ‘Steve Witkoff’s Critical Role in Negotiating Global Peace, and the Warmongers Trying to Stop Him’, *The Tucker Carlson Show*, 21 March 2025, timestamp 1:15:33, <https://youtu.be/acvu2LBumGo?si=Akl3MTCN-gra9p7SV>.

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Why NATO's deterrence critically depends on the threat of escalation

To date, much governmental action in NATO capitals has focused on taking defensive measures and strengthening resilience to hybrid threats. Yet such a reactive approach, however understandable, continues to favour the Russian Federation in economic as well as strategic terms. Paraphrasing counterinsurgency theorist David Galula: it is cheap for Russia to create chaos, but prohibitively expensive for NATO to maintain order by relying on defensive resilience alone. The core challenge for NATO is to counter the twin elements enabling the Russian theory of victory as outlined above. Firstly, this implies considering offensive responses to address escalation dynamics – both below and above the level of armed conflict. Yet secondly, this also requires addressing Russia's existing nuclear advantage, not just in terms of non-strategic capabilities, but especially in terms of stiffening NATO's collective resolve.

While the need to shore up defences against hybrid threats has already been widely recognised, the escalation dynamic has more recently prompted calls for striking back. For example, Seth G. Jones has argued that “Europe and the United States should complement defensive measures with an offensive campaign designed to raise the costs on Moscow for continuing sabotage and subversion.”¹⁴ Such a more proactive approach could include expanding economic sanctions, dealing with the Russian shadow fleet in a more muscular way and doubling-down on military aid and economic assistance to Ukraine. Such efforts are already getting underway. In a more far-reaching version of the argument, Western governments could also turn to their own security services to undertake targeted efforts aimed at destabilising the Russian regime itself, instead of just penalising its brazen behaviour.

If no defensive stopgap exists to halt escalation dynamic, NATO capitals must also acknowledge that there is no conventional or hybrid offensive solution to what is a nuclear problem. Even if NATO capitals were to aggressively escalate their own hybrid responses to Russian sabotage or threaten conventional war when Russia's actions either deliberately or inadvertently cross the Article 5 threshold, the problem remains that the Russian theory of victory relies on a multitude of nuclear escalation options to offset a strategic defeat. Due to the stark asymmetry of non-strategic nuclear capabilities, the Russian Federation can choose to confront NATO in a nuclear salvo competition – in effect betting its own survival on the assumption that it can cope with competitive cost imposition much better and longer than is the case for many allied capitals. If NATO has no credible theory of victory of its own for conflict above the nuclear threshold, it paradoxically may end up tempting the Russian leadership to explore this dark and ominous pathway to what it may hope to be a desperate victory.

Fortunately, NATO's own history teaches that the manifest determination to escalate conflict on its own terms is key to successful deterrence and the management of escalation dynamics. Its erstwhile ‘flexible response’ strategic concept stated unambiguously that “the main deterrence to aggression short of full nuclear attack is the threat of escalation”.¹⁵ Even if the NATO may choose to try and achieve its objectives and counter aggression without escalation, it was collectively agreed that “NATO must be manifestly prepared at all times

¹⁴ Seth G. Jones, ‘Russia's Sabotage Campaign in Europe’, *Survival*, 67 (6), December 2025-January 2026, pp. 129-148.

¹⁵ NATO, ‘Overall Strategic Concept for the Defense of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization Area’ (MC 14/3), Brussels: NATO Defence Planning Committee, 12 December 1967, § 22.a.

to escalate the conflict, using nuclear weapons if necessary.”¹⁶ This remains true today. If NATO is not able to credibly threaten escalation on its own terms – when and where this may be military or politically required – it cannot rely on its deterrence strategy to constrain all forms of aggressive Russian behaviour. Naturally NATO may need to consider far-reaching adaptation of its deterrence posture to be able to constrain Russian at every major escalation threshold.¹⁷ Yet the hardware changes that are necessary for generating an appropriately diversified menu of strike options remain themselves insufficient if these are not accompanied by a stiffening of NATO’s own will to escalate in order to induce fear in the minds of Russian decision-makers.

Conclusion

If the rash decision of Russian leaders to escalate their hybrid war against the Euro-Atlantic security architecture is grounded in their confidence that their nuclear advantage makes them able to manage escalation better than NATO, and earn the resulting strategic dividends, then the core challenge for NATO is not limited to improving its own defensive reactions against such threats. To deal effectively with the problem at hand requires instilling strategic restraint in the minds of the Russian leadership and undermining their belief that escalation works to their advantage. In essence, this means turning the table in the battle of political will that characterises political conflict. If NATO capitals want the Kremlin to back down from its quest to fundamentally revise the post-Cold War settlement, they must make sure the Russian leadership has compelling reasons to fear escalation again.

¹⁶ Idem.

¹⁷ Cf. Greg Weaver, ‘The imperative of augmenting US theater nuclear forces’, Washington DC: Atlantic Council, 11 April 2025, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/03/The-imperative-of-augmenting-US-theater-nuclear-forces.pdf>.



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