

# BRIEFER

No. 47 | March 27, 2023

---

# RUSSIAN NUCLEAR WEAPONS AND BELARUS: NATO SHOULD CONTINUE TO STAND STEADY

By Andrew Facini, John Gower, John Moulton, Christine Parthemore, and Sahil V. Shah

---

On March 25, Russian President Vladimir Putin announced further moves to operationalize his plan to deploy Russian tactical nuclear weapons to Belarus.<sup>1</sup> Although it is presently unclear if and when Russia will actually station these weapons on its neighbor's territory, such steps are reckless, in particular given the heightened tensions surrounding the war in Ukraine.

How the United States and its NATO allies react in the coming days, weeks, and months will play a major role in shaping the trajectory of the following decades. The world may be on the cusp of multiple nuclear-armed nations following Russia down a road of aggression and risk-inducing posture changes, including through the expansion of nuclear capabilities, increased reliance on such weapons, and a growth in the number of ways in which these weapons are used in times of conflict. It is imperative that NATO nations continue to avoid chasing Putin down this dangerous path.

To date, NATO leaders have charted a well-balanced position that includes appropriate projections of strength alongside measures of restraint, responsibility, and commitment to pursuing international cooperation. We

---

<sup>1</sup> "Putin says Russia will station tactical nukes in Belarus," AP News, March 25, 2023.

recommend that NATO members continue following this path and pursue additional risk reduction measures in the following ways.

## **STAND STEADY—STRONG YET RESTRAINED**

In the near-term, NATO countries should maintain the stern yet restrained tone they set in the first days after Putin’s announcement. As NATO spokesperson Oana Lungescu said on Sunday: “We have not seen any changes in Russia’s nuclear posture that would lead us to adjust our own.”<sup>2</sup> In the United States, national security leaders echoed that position and noted that they did not yet see indications of Russia moving nuclear warheads.<sup>3</sup> NATO government representatives also continue to emphasize unity in the defensive role of the alliance.

Additionally, NATO officials will need to continue emphasizing the history and reasoning behind the NATO nuclear weapons posture, which predates the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) and is accommodated within the Treaty system. Despite claims by Putin, a new deployment of nuclear weapons in Belarus was not envisioned when a newly independent Belarus ratified the NPT as a non-nuclear weapon state in 1993. This issue presents a complex diplomatic challenge as Russia increases its emphasis on nuclear weapons during a conflict situation. It is positive that NATO nations are already showing that a firm but not inflammatory balance can be struck, and this balance should be maintained.

## **AVOID MIMICKING PUTIN’S BAD BEHAVIOR**

From Putin’s latest irresponsible move, we will see many calls for reactive behavior—expanding the U.S. nuclear weapons arsenal beyond the current triad modernization plan, increasing signaling actions with nuclear-capable delivery systems, or others. This is almost surely what Putin wants: to set up a series of U.S./NATO actions that he can claim are to blame for his own aggressive behavior, and possibly justify further risk-taking amid the war in Ukraine. This outcome is unnecessary. NATO’s nuclear deterrence posture is secure whether Putin’s tactical nuclear weapons cross into Belarus or not, and being over-reactive to an adversaries’ poor behavior allows their policy whims to dictate strategy.

While there may come a contingency when its leaders deem additional measures are necessary, NATO’s political unity, conventional strength, and existing nuclear posture allow it to continue projecting leadership in being a responsible actor and avoiding actions that could make the situation even worse. Alliance leaders are wisely examining which moves could inflame the situation or enable further bad steps by Russia, and which steps will best leave the door open for defusing these tensions.

2 Dan Peleschuk, “NATO criticises Putin’s ‘dangerous and irresponsible’ nuclear rhetoric.” Reuters. March 26, 2023.

3 Kelly Garrity, “Russia’s game of nuclear chess is worrisome, American officials say,” March 26, 2023.

## **CONTINUE TO SUPPORT MULTILATERALISM THROUGH THE UNITED NATIONS**

The UN has helped to foster a remarkable (even if not unanimous) level of agreement among the world's nations to push back on mis- and disinformation, condemn military activities that affect civilians or critical infrastructure such as nuclear power plants, and perpetuate the major treaties that form the foundation of the existing international order, including the NPT. NATO member states should continue their work to strengthen UN institutions and processes, and leverage its role in condemning actions that contravene long-held norms and international goals of avoiding catastrophic conflicts.

## **FURTHER PRIORITIZE CURTAILING TACTICAL NUCLEAR WEAPONS RISKS.**

The end of the Cold War was marked by the concerted move away from the deployment of, and reliance on, tactical and theater nuclear weapons. Unfortunately, this progress has shown signs of reversal over the past decade, leading to today's security environment in which nuclear weapons threats are rising.

As such, curtailing the risks of tactical nuclear weapons and systems with similar characteristics should be prioritized in near-term risk reduction efforts, and in developing possible future arms control steps. If nations can pursue such paths in the future, walking back from the currently increasing dangers of tactical nuclear weapons being deployed in Belarus will be high on the list of goals. Yet there is even more potential for future cooperation with regard to these types of weapons, in particular given that they do not yet play a role in China's nuclear posture and all countries in the Indo-Pacific would see mutual security benefits from preventing a regional landscape akin to Europe during the Cold War. While further progress on reducing the risks of *strategic* nuclear weapons should be pursued in the future, it is urgent to curtail and reverse the growing threat and proliferation of tactical nuclear capabilities.

## **AVOID THE TEMPTATION TO ALTER IMPLEMENTATION OF THE NEW START TREATY**

On February 21, 2023, Putin announced that Russia was suspending its New START Treaty implementation.<sup>4</sup> As U.S. officials have worked to game out the potential effects and proper responses, many experts and officials have suggested a range of options, including mirroring what Russia does and even throwing in the towel on arms control. At least for now, the best approach is to continue meeting U.S. responsibilities in treaty imple-

---

4 Andrew Roth and Julian Borger, "Putin says Russia will halt participation in New Start nuclear arms treaty," *The Guardian*, February 21, 2023.

mentation, especially to not complicate a potential return to Russian compliance. This includes continuing data transmissions and notifications which can help mitigate risks of miscalculation even if not reciprocated by Russia. Additionally, the United States should continue to abide by New START numerical limits and avoid the temptation to react by increasing deployed warhead numbers if Russia does. Not only is this best for maintaining the high road and complying with NPT obligations; it helps to show that the NATO deterrent is sufficient and appropriate, and that the Alliance is in a position of strength that does not require reactionary moves.

## **CONTINUE TRANSPARENCY EFFORTS FOR B61-12 DEPLOYMENT**

As the U.S. modernization of B61 gravity bombs was decided and carried out, the United States publicly relayed its plans, including general timing regarding their long-planned deployment. This transparency should continue, and be coupled with communications tailored to the fact that Putin will almost certainly mischaracterize these plans as a new and inflammatory step. U.S. and NATO leaders can plan ahead for this and seek to handle it in ways that minimize risks of misinterpretation.

## **STRENGTHEN NATO EFFORTS ON STRATEGIC AND NUCLEAR RISK REDUCTION**

In line with NATO's most recent Strategic Concept,<sup>5</sup> the Alliance should energize risk reduction efforts by “promoting confidence building and predictability through dialogue, increasing understanding, and establishing effective crisis management and prevention tools.” Building on NATO meetings on risk reduction in the Netherlands (October 2022) and United Kingdom (March 2023), the Alliance should elevate its long-running efforts to assess the drivers of current risks and pathways to actionable measures that could reduce them in today's geopolitical and technological environment.

As government bandwidth will be further absorbed by Putin's latest moves—in addition to the continuing war in Ukraine and numerous other acute challenges—non-governmental organizations and former officials should play an increasing role in augmenting official efforts.

In particular, the United States and NATO should investigate how to limit the risks tied to inadvertent or accidental nuclear escalation, including through revitalized crisis communication channels with Russia on both a political and military level. It is helpful that the United States is discussing such measures with Russia as part of wider strategic risk reduction efforts amongst P5 countries, but there is a need for said dialogue between NATO and Russia as well.

---

<sup>5</sup> North Atlantic Treaty Organization, *NATO 2022 Strategic Concept*, June 29, 2022.

## CONCLUSION

Putin's announcements on stationing nuclear weapons in Belarus do not at this time reveal inevitable tactical gains or detract from NATO's deterrence mission. However, similar to his announcement to suspend Russian legal obligations under the New START Treaty, they do reduce strategic stability between nuclear weapon states. Indeed, both are diversionary tactics to distract from the publicly displayed shortcomings of the Russian armed forces and private military companies during their invasion of Ukraine, and the inability of Putin's "Special Military Operation" to achieve its objectives, namely weakening NATO resolve and unity, and bringing a weakened and less united Ukraine into the Russian orbit.

To be clear, Russia advancing its plans to deploy tactical nuclear weapons in Belarus is extremely dangerous, and if fully pursued could worsen the risk of nuclear weapons being used. But it does not alter U.S. and NATO nuclear or conventional deterrent capabilities. We must treat it for what it is and not overreact with the very types of behavior Putin is hoping that NATO states will pursue so that he can continue claiming to his domestic constituency and international audiences that NATO is the aggressor.

At this time, addressing this dangerous situation does not require steps that could inadvertently contribute to inflaming the current situation or worsening the trend toward greater reliance on and deployment of tactical nuclear weapons. NATO allies are striking an appropriate balance of strength and restraint, and showcasing what it takes to remain as responsible actors even during times of crisis. Maintaining this approach is important in the near term, and may be extremely consequential in shaping the long term.

## ABOUT THE AUTHORS

**Andrew Facini** is Communications Director for the Council on Strategic Risks and a Fellow in the Janne E. Nolan Center for Strategic Weapons.

Rear Admiral **John Gower**, CB OBE, is a Senior Advisor with the Janne E. Nolan Center on Strategic Weapons at the Council on Strategic Risks.

Captain **John Moulton** (U.S. Navy, Retired) is Deputy Director of the Janne E. Nolan Center on Strategic Weapons.

**Christine Parthemore** is Chief Executive Officer of the Council on Strategic Risks and the Director of the Janne E. Nolan Center on Strategic Weapons.

**Sahil V. Shah** is a Senior Fellow and Program Manager at the Janne E. Nolan Center on Strategic Weapons.