

# How high is the risk of nuclear weapon use following the Russian invasion of Ukraine?

British Pugwash Note, March 2022

During an interview on 3 March Sergey Lavrov, Russia's Foreign Minister, said:

"We have a military doctrine that describes the parameters and conditions for using nuclear weapons. There is no "escalation for the sake of de-escalation" there... I would like to draw your attention to the fact that the thought of nuclear war is constantly running through the minds of Western politicians but not the minds of Russians. I assure you that we will not let any provocations cause us to lose our balance."

What is the military doctrine to which Minister Lavrov was referring?

In June 2020 the Russian government made public a document under the title Fundamentals of the State Policy of the Russian Federation in the Field of Nuclear Deterrence. It seems probable that this is where the doctrine in question can be found. Paragraphs 17 to 19 of this policy statement read as follows:

"III. Conditions for the transition of the Russian Federation to the use of nuclear weapons:

17. The Russian Federation reserves the right to use nuclear weapons in response to the use of nuclear weapons and other weapons of mass destruction against it and (or) its allies, as well as in the case of aggression against the Russian Federation using conventional weapons when the very existence of the state is threatened.

18. The decision to use nuclear weapons is made by the President of the Russian Federation.

19. The conditions determining the possibility of the use of nuclear weapons by the Russian Federation are:

- a) the receipt of reliable information about the launch of ballistic missiles attacking the territory of the Russian Federation and (or) its allies;
- b) the use by the adversary of nuclear weapons or other types of weapons of mass destruction across the territories of the Russian Federation and (or) its allies;
- c) the enemy's influence on critical state or military facilities of the Russian Federation, the failure of which will lead to the disruption of the retaliatory action of nuclear forces;
- d) aggression against the Russian Federation with the use of conventional weapons, when the very existence of the state is jeopardized."

As for "escalation for de-escalation", it is a concept that first appeared in a 2000 statement of Russian military doctrine. It referred to escalating a conflict to a level of violence that causes an adversary to cease military operations. It envisages

the use of nuclear weapons “in response to large-scale aggression utilizing conventional weapons in situations critical to the national security of the Russian Federation.”

It seems significant that “escalation for de-escalation” does not appear in the 2020 doctrinal statement. However, some Western experts doubt whether it has been abandoned (which probably explains Minister Lavrov’s mention of it). In as much as its essence is to make first use of nuclear weapons to stem a conventional attack, it can be thought to fall within the parameters of condition 19 d) above - and to invite comparison with the thinking that underlies NATO’s 2010 Strategic Concept which leaves open the option of first use:

“Deterrence, based on an appropriate mix of nuclear and conventional capabilities, remains a core element of our overall strategy. The circumstances in which any use of nuclear weapons might have to be contemplated are extremely remote.”

What can be inferred from these Russian doctrines in relation to the situation created by the Russian invasion of Ukraine? At this point the risk seems low that the situation will produce occurrences that accord with the conditions set out in paragraph 19 above. There has been no indication from any authoritative governmental or military source that either NATO or Ukraine intends to launch ballistic missiles towards or across Russian territory or to cripple critical Russian state or military facilities or to put in jeopardy the very existence of the Russian state.

However, the possibility must be entertained that Russia’s leadership will choose to interpret certain occurrences as falling within the parameters of the 2020 doctrinal statement; and it cannot be excluded that Russia’s leadership will take decisions that do not accord with the 2020 doctrine.