

Research Briefing

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Russia's use of nuclear threats during the Ukraine conflict

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1

Summary

[Russian nuclear doctrine does not advocate first use of nuclear weapons](#), but neither does it rule out first use in response to a conventional attack that threatens the existence of the state.

President Putin has increasingly used the threat of the Russian nuclear arsenal to pressurise the West over its military and diplomatic support for Ukraine following Russia's invasion in February 2022.

As part of this campaign of nuclear pressure, Russia has placed its weapons on heightened alert, tested and deployed new nuclear capabilities, threatened to resume nuclear testing, and suspended participation in a key nuclear arms control treaty with the US.

In March 2023 [Russia said it would deploy tactical nuclear weapons to Belarus](#), the first of which arrived in June 2023. This is the first time that Russia has deployed nuclear weapons outside of the country since the collapse of the Soviet Union. While not a direct violation of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty, some have argued that, [like NATO nuclear sharing agreements, the decision contravenes the spirit of the NPT](#).

The [US and NATO have called Russia's increasing nuclear rhetoric over the conflict in Ukraine "irresponsible"](#). China has called for restraint and said that [the use, or threat of use of nuclear weapons should be opposed](#).

2

Russian nuclear doctrine

Russia is the largest nuclear weapon state in the world. According to its nuclear doctrine Russia does not advocate first use of nuclear weapons, but neither does it rule out first use in response to a conventional attack that threatens the existence of the state.¹

In January 2022 the five NPT recognised nuclear weapon states (the P5), including Russia, also issued a statement in which they affirmed that “a nuclear war cannot be won and must never be fought” and that nuclear weapons “should serve defensive purposes, deter aggression, and prevent war”.²

That position was reiterated in November 2022, in [a statement by the Russian Foreign Ministry on preventing nuclear war](#).

Russian nuclear doctrine and capabilities are examined in further detail in Library briefing: [Nuclear weapons at a glance: Russia](#)

¹ Russian Government, [Foundations of State Policy in the Area of Nuclear Deterrence](#).

² [Joint Statement of the Leaders of the Five Nuclear Weapon States](#), 3 January 2022. Under the Nuclear Non-proliferation Treaty only the US, Russia, China, France and the UK are recognised as nuclear states as they detonated a nuclear device prior to the treaty's entry into force. India, Pakistan and Israel are considered de facto nuclear states. North Korea is not formally acknowledged as a nuclear power but is considered nuclear capable.

3

Increasing nuclear rhetoric

President Putin has increasingly used the threat of the Russian nuclear arsenal to pressurise the West over its military and diplomatic support for Ukraine following Russia's invasion in February 2022 (see box 1).

While President Putin's threats have largely been considered rhetoric and not matched by visible efforts to deploy Russia's nuclear weapons,³ several analysts have noted the impact on Western audiences who fear nuclear escalation.⁴ In the longer term there have also been concerns that faced with a failing military campaign in Ukraine Russia could resort to the use of tactical nuclear weapons on the battlefield to achieve its objectives.⁵

Members of the G7, including nuclear powers France, the US and UK, have called Russia's nuclear posturing "irresponsible" and "unacceptable",⁶ while the NATO Secretary General has condemned Russia's "reckless nuclear rhetoric".⁷

Without directly referencing Russia, the Chinese President Xi Jinping has said that nuclear weapons must not be used in Ukraine:

Under the current circumstances, the international community should support all efforts conducive to the peaceful settlement of the Ukraine crisis and call on relevant parties to remain rational and exercise restraint, start direct engagement as quickly as possible, and create conditions for the resumption of talks; oppose the use of or the threat to use nuclear weapons, advocate that nuclear weapons cannot be used and that nuclear wars must not be fought, and prevent a nuclear crisis in Eurasia...⁸

Nuclear state India has also warned Russia about the possible use of nuclear weapons in Ukraine, calling the prospect one that "goes against the basic tenets of humanity".⁹

In a Congressional hearing on 4 May 2023, the US Director of National Intelligence, Avril Haines, said it remained "unlikely" that Russia would resort to nuclear weapons.¹⁰

³ RUSI Commentary, "[Putin is a nuclear bully](#)", 1 March 2022 and Congressional Research Service, [Russia's nuclear weapons: doctrine, forces and modernization](#) (PDF), 21 March 2022

⁴ Gustav Gressel, "[Shadow of the bomb: Russia's nuclear threats](#)", European Council on Foreign Relations, July 2022

⁵ Dr Patricia Lewis, Chatham House, "[How likely is the use of nuclear weapons by Russia?](#)", 1 March 2022; "[Putin: The psychology of nuclear brinkmanship](#)", Foreign Affairs, 30 May 2023 and "[Could Russia really play nuclear roulette in Ukraine?](#)", BBC News, 22 June 2023

⁶ Downing Street, [G7 Leaders statement](#), 12 December 2022

⁷ NATO, [Press conference](#), 16 June 2023

⁸ "[Xi meets German Chancellor Olaf Scholz](#)", Xinhua Chinese News Agency, 5 November 2022

⁹ "[India warns Russia against use of nuclear weapons in Ukraine](#)", India Today, 26 October 2022

¹⁰ "[Russian use of nuclear weapons still unlikely](#)", Arms Control Today, June 2023

1 Brief timeline of Russian nuclear pressure

President Putin, Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov and Dmitry Medvedev, Deputy Chairman of the Russian Security Council, frequently refer to Russia's nuclear arsenal within the context of Ukraine.¹¹ Among the more prominent statements and actions are:

- 24 February 2022 – President Putin warned against any interference in Ukraine from outside or of a direct attack on Russia and said Russia would respond immediately and the consequences would be “such as you have never seen in your entire history”.¹²
- 27 February 2022 - President Putin orders Russian nuclear forces to move to a heightened status of alert. Putin said he was issuing this order in response to escalating economic sanctions and “aggressive statements” being issued by the West following Russia’s invasion of Ukraine.¹³
- 20 April 2022 – Russia tests its new Sarmat intercontinental ballistic missile (ICBM), although the US was pre-notified of the test under the terms of the New START treaty.¹⁴
- 12 May – Medvedev says NATO military aid to Ukraine risks conflict with Russia and “fully fledged nuclear war”.¹⁵
- 21 September 2022 – In an address to the nation President Putin said that in the event of a threat to the territorial integrity of Russia, “we will certainly make use of all weapon systems available to us. This is not a bluff”.¹⁶
- 30 September 2022 and 16 June 2023 – President Putin makes reference to the use of nuclear weapons in Hiroshima and Nagasaki, suggesting that the US had “created a precedent”.¹⁷

¹¹ See for example “[Nuclear rhetoric and escalation management in Russia’s war against Ukraine](#)” (PDF), SWP Working Paper, September 2022 for a chronology of nuclear threats in the first six months of the conflict.

¹² President of Russia, [Address by the President of the Russian Federation](#), 24 February 2022

¹³ TASS, “[Putin orders special service regime in Russia’s deterrence force](#)”, 27 February 2022

¹⁴ The development of Russia’s new ICBM is examined in Library paper, [Nuclear weapons at a glance: Russia](#)

¹⁵ “Dmitry Medvedev warns of Russia-NATO nuclear war over Western help”, The Times, 12 May 2022

¹⁶ President of Russia, [Address by the President of the Russian Federation](#), 21 September 2022

¹⁷ President of Russia, [Signing of treaties on accession](#), 30 September 2022 and [Plenary Session of the St Petersburg International Economic Forum](#), 16 June 2023

- February 2023 – Russia suspends its participation in the New START treaty, threatens to resume nuclear testing and places new nuclear capabilities on combat duty, although does not specify which capabilities.¹⁸ The New START treaty, which is the only bilateral arms control treaty limiting the strategic nuclear arsenals of the US and Russia, expires in 2026.
- 25 March 2023 – Russia announces that it will deploy tactical nuclear weapons in Belarus (see below).
- June 2023 – Russia restates that a return to New START would only be possible if the US abandoned its “fundamentally hostile policy toward the Russian Federation”.¹⁹
- 21 June 2023 – President Putin confirmed that the new Sarmat ICBM (Satan II) would be placed on combat duty “in the near future”.²⁰

4 Movement of tactical nuclear weapons to Belarus

Putin's latest move in his campaign of nuclear pressure has been the announcement that Russian tactical nuclear weapons, which are lower yield nuclear warheads designed for use on the battlefield, will be deployed in Belarus.

Post-Soviet nuclear status of Belarus

Belarus is a non-nuclear weapon state under the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty.

The dissolution of the Soviet Union in late 1991 left Soviet nuclear weapons stationed on the territory of four newly independent states - Russia, Kazakhstan, Ukraine and Belarus.

Between them, Kazakhstan, Ukraine and Belarus inherited over 3,000 strategic nuclear weapons, in addition to an estimated 3,000 tactical nuclear warheads. Ukraine became the third largest nuclear weapons state in the world.

¹⁸ President of Russia, [Presidential Address to Federal Assembly](#), 21 February 2023

¹⁹ [“Russia, US recently held direct consultations on New START”](#), TASS Russian News Agency, 15 June 2023

²⁰ President of Russia, [Meeting with top graduates of higher military schools](#), 21 June 2023

	Strategic warheads	Tactical warheads
Belarus	100	725
Kazakhstan	1,410	N/K
Ukraine	1,900	2,275

Source: Robert S. Norris, "The Soviet Nuclear Archipelago," *Arms Control Today*, January/February 1992, p. 24 and Joseph Cirincione, et al., *Deadly Arsenal*, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2005, p. 366.

The Lisbon Protocol

Despite never having had operational control over those nuclear weapons,²¹ the uncertain fate of the former Soviet nuclear arsenal raised serious concerns within the international community and subsequently prompted talks between the US, Russia and the three newly independent states.

In May 1992 they concluded the [Lisbon Protocol](#) to the Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (START I), a bilateral nuclear arms reduction treaty which the US and Russia had previously agreed in July 1991.²² Under the Protocol all four former Soviet states became parties to the START treaty. It was also agreed that Russia would remain the only nuclear weapon state and that Belarus, Kazakhstan and Ukraine would relinquish their inherited nuclear arsenals and return them to Russia. The Protocol also committed those states to accede to the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) as non-nuclear weapon states "in the shortest time possible".

In December 1994, Belarus, Russia, the UK and the United States also signed the [Memorandum of Security Assurances in connection with the Republic of Belarus Accession to the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons](#) (PDF). Parallel memorandums were also signed with Kazakhstan and [Ukraine](#) (PDF) (what is often referred to as the 1994 Budapest Memorandum). Albeit not formal treaties, the agreements, established in accordance with the [1975 Helsinki Accords](#), provided security assurances against the "threat or use of force against the territorial integrity or political independence" of each country, in exchange for their full nuclear disarmament and accession to the NPT.

Belarus formally ratified START in February 1993 and acceded to the NPT in July 1993. It completed the withdrawal of nuclear weapons from its territory in November 1996.

²¹ This is discussed in: Cheryl Rofer, "[Could Ukraine have retained Soviet nuclear weapons?](#)", Nuclear Diner, 6 February 2022

²² More information on START I is available in Library briefing CBP8421, [Prospects for US-Russian Nuclear Arms Control](#)

As a non-nuclear weapon state under the NPT, Belarus has committed not to receive the transfer of, or control over, nuclear weapons, and not to manufacture or otherwise acquire nuclear weapons.²³

Proposals for nuclear basing in Belarus

In the 1990s Russia and Belarus signed a series of treaties which proposed greater political and economic integration between the two countries. They culminated in the signing of the [Treaty on the Establishment of the Union State](#) in December 1999.²⁴

Greater cooperation within the defence and security sphere has been a key part of that integration and in November 2021 a new military doctrine for the Union State was adopted. That doctrine identifies NATO as the most important challenge to the security of the Union State and, as such, deeper military integration and the expansion of the Russian military presence in Belarus to counter the alleged threats posed by NATO on its borders is widely anticipated.²⁵ The doctrine doesn't address the issue of nuclear weapons being deployed in Belarus, but as some commentators noted, the doctrine "doesn't say anything about a ban on it either".²⁶

Changes to the Belarusian constitution

In November 2021 President Lukashenko publicly offered to host Russian nuclear weapons in Belarus.²⁷

That offer was followed in December 2021 by proposals to amend Belarus' constitution. In addition to proposals to extend Lukashenko's time in office and give him lifelong immunity from prosecution, the constitutional changes would remove the country's commitment to neutrality and its status as a nuclear weapons free zone.²⁸

That constitutional change was approved in a referendum in February 2022, thereby rescinding the non-nuclear status Belarus adopted in 1994 and paving the way for any future decision to station Russian nuclear forces in the country.

²³ United Nations, [Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty](#), Article II

²⁴ For a history of development of the Union State, see [An ever closer union?](#). Clingendael Institute, August 2021

²⁵ See "[New military doctrine of the Union State of Belarus and Russia](#)", Polish Institute of International Affairs, February 2022

²⁶ "[New Union military doctrine of Belarus and Russia revealed](#)", Belsat, 10 February 2022

²⁷ "[Belarus President offers to host Russian nuclear weapons](#)", Associated Press, 30 November 2021

²⁸ "[Belarus seeks to amend its constitution to host Russian nuclear weapons](#)", International Institute for Strategic Studies, 4 February 2022

Iskander-M missiles and re-roling of the Su-25

During a meeting with President Putin in June 2022, President Lukashenko once again raised the issue of nuclear basing, seemingly as an “equivalent response” to NATO nuclear exercises.²⁹

In what was a carefully choreographed announcement, President Putin responded to that request by announcing that Belarus' Su-25 aircraft would be re-equipped to take on a nuclear, as well as conventional, role (also referred to as dual capable) and that a requisite training programme for Belarusian pilots should also begin.³⁰ He also announced the transfer of Iskander-M short-range (up to 500km) tactical missiles to Belarus, which are capable of being used in either a conventional or nuclear role.³¹

Kremlin spokesperson, Dmitry Peskov clarified the next day that the announcement did not, however, confirm the movement of nuclear weapons to Belarus.³²

Deployment of nuclear weapons in Belarus

In March 2023 President Putin provided an update on those plans. In an interview with Russian news channel Rossiya-24, President Putin said that, at the request of Belarus, Russia would deploy tactical nuclear weapons in the country.³³ This is the first time that Russia will have deployed nuclear weapons outside of the country since the collapse of the Soviet Union.

He confirmed that ten Belarusian Su-25 aircraft had been converted to the nuclear role and that the Iskander-M dual capable missile system was already deployed in the country. Training would commence in April and a new nuclear weapons storage facility would be completed in July 2023.

²⁹ President of Russia, [Meeting with President Alexander Lukashenko of Belarus](#), 25 June 2022. NATO conducts an annual nuclear deterrence exercise: Steadfast Noon, in the autumn. NATO has referred to it as a “recurring training activity” which is “not linked to current world events”. The most recent exercise was in October 2022 (NATO, [Press release](#), 14 October 2022)

³⁰ The choice of the Su-25, as opposed to the more modern Su-35 which Belarus also possesses, is thought to have been based on the fact that the Su-25 was originally produced with a nuclear capability, thereby making conversion faster and cheaper (See [“Russia is deploying nuclear weapons in Belarus: NATO shouldn't take the bait”](#), Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists, 24 April 2023)

³¹ Since 2016, Russia has also had the Iskander-M deployed in the Russian enclave of Kaliningrad on the borders of Poland and Lithuania ([“Iskander-M in Kaliningrad: The changing equations of deterrence”](#), Institute of Peace and Conflict Studies, 9 November 2016)

³² [“Putin did not tell Lukashenko about the transfer of nuclear missiles to Minsk, Petrov said”](#), RIA Novosti, 28 June 2022 (in Russian)

³³ [“Russia to deploy its tactical nuclear weapons in Belarus at request of Minsk, says Putin”](#), TASS Russian News Agency, 25 March 2023.

However, President Putin also went on to state that the nuclear sharing agreement did not involve the transfer of nuclear weapons to Belarus as the use of such weapons would remain under Russian control.³⁴

In taking this decision, Putin said that it reflected the practice of the United States in its nuclear sharing agreements³⁵ and that in doing so, Russia was not violating its international obligations on the non-proliferation of nuclear weapons (see below).³⁶

President Putin also suggested that the decision was in response to the UK's provision of depleted uranium shells to Ukraine, which, he asserted, are "somehow connected with nuclear technology".³⁷ In previous statements President Putin has equated the provision of depleted uranium shells to the use of weapons "with a nuclear component".³⁸

In a speech to the St Petersburg International Economic Forum on 16 June 2023, President Putin confirmed that the first delivery of tactical nuclear weapons to Belarus had been made.³⁹ He went on to suggest that further warheads would be delivered by the end of the year.⁴⁰

Although not publicly disclosed, the Su-25 is thought to be deployed at the Lida air base in western Belarus, close to the Lithuanian border.⁴¹ Commentators have speculated that the Iskander-M could be deployed either

³⁴ ["Russia to deploy its tactical nuclear weapons in Belarus at request of Minsk, says Putin"](#), TASS Russian News Agency, 25 March 2023. This point was reiterated by Russian Defence Minister, Sergei Shoigu in May 2023: ["Moscow to remain in control of Russian nukes deployed in Belarus – defense chief Shoigu"](#), TASS Russian News Agency, 25 May 2023

³⁵ The US has had nuclear weapons deployed in Europe since the 1950s. It currently has an estimated 100 tactical nuclear weapons (B-61 gravity bombs) deployed in five NATO countries: Belgium, Germany, Netherlands, Italy and Turkey. The US withdrew its tactical nuclear weapons from Greece in 2001 and the UK in 2008 (See ["Nuclear weapons in Europe: Mapping US and Russian deployments"](#), Council on Foreign Relations, 30 March 2023)

³⁶ ["Russia to deploy its tactical nuclear weapons in Belarus at request of Minsk, says Putin"](#), TASS Russian News Agency, 25 March 2023

³⁷ ["Russia to deploy its tactical nuclear weapons in Belarus at request of Minsk, says Putin"](#), TASS Russian News Agency, 25 March 2023.

³⁸ President of Russia, [Press statements by President of Russia and President of China](#), 21 March 2023. Depleted uranium is a waste by-product of the uranium enrichment process. It has been used by the military since the 1970s as a component in heavy tank armour and for use in armour piercing munitions. Depleted uranium shells are not nuclear weapons as the radioactive material is not used to produce a nuclear reaction and explosion.

³⁹ President of Russia, [Plenary session of the St Petersburg International Economic Forum](#), 16 June 2023

⁴⁰ President of Russia, [Plenary session of the St Petersburg International Economic Forum](#), 16 June 2023

⁴¹ ["Russia is deploying nuclear weapons in Belarus: NATO shouldn't take the bait"](#), Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists, 24 April 2023

at Lida or at Postavy air base, also close to the Lithuanian border in the north-west of the country.⁴²

Does this contravene the NPT?

There is a longstanding debate as to whether nuclear sharing contravenes Articles I and II of the NPT.⁴³

2 Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty, Articles I and II

Article I

Each nuclear-weapon State Party to the Treaty undertakes not to transfer to any recipient whatsoever nuclear weapons or other nuclear explosive devices or control over such weapons or explosive devices directly, or indirectly; and not in any way to assist, encourage, or induce any non-nuclear-weapon State to manufacture or otherwise acquire nuclear weapons or other nuclear explosive devices, or control over such weapons or explosive devices.

Article II

Each non-nuclear-weapon State Party to the Treaty undertakes not to receive the transfer from any transferor whatsoever of nuclear weapons or other nuclear explosive devices or of control over such weapons or explosive devices directly, or indirectly; not to manufacture or otherwise acquire nuclear weapons or other nuclear explosive devices; and not to seek or receive any assistance in the manufacture of nuclear weapons or other nuclear explosive devices.

While the NPT refers to a prohibition on the transfer of nuclear weapons, and implicit in that the control of such weapons and access to nuclear technologies, the treaty does not explicitly forbid the stationing of nuclear weapons in non-nuclear, allied states.

The US has long justified NATO's policy of nuclear sharing on an interpretation of the NPT which argues that US allies do not have ownership or command

⁴² [“Russia is deploying nuclear weapons in Belarus: NATO shouldn't take the bait”](#), Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists, 24 April 2023

⁴³ This issue was debated extensively in the 1990s within the context of the indefinite extension of the NPT. See, for example: [“NATO: Nuclear sharing or proliferation?”](#) (PDF), BASIC/Oxford Research Group, 2005 and [“NATO nuclear sharing and the NPT – questions to be answered”](#), Berlin Information Center for Transatlantic Security, June 1997. It has also been raised more recently within the context of the new [Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons \(TPNW\)](#). See, [“NATO's nuclear sharing arrangements revisited in light of the NPT and TPNW”](#), Journal of Conflict and Security Law, Winter 2021

and control of the nuclear weapons deployed in their countries, and therefore no transfer violation exists.⁴⁴ NATO has also argued that nuclear sharing pre-dates the NPT (agreed in 1968) and therefore this a moot point.⁴⁵

Nevertheless, there is also a school of thought that, while not a direct violation of the treaty in practice, it does contravene the treaty in spirit as allies have the capacity to deliver a nuclear warhead and undertake annual deterrence exercises (see above).⁴⁶

NATO's 2022 Strategic Concept, which sets out the fundamental roles and purpose of the alliance, acknowledges the importance of nuclear sharing:

NATO's nuclear deterrence posture also relies on the United States' nuclear weapons forward-deployed in Europe and the contributions of Allies concerned. National contributions of dual-capable aircraft to NATO's nuclear deterrence mission remain central to this effort.⁴⁷

Russia has long criticised the US for the stationing of nuclear weapons in Europe, having previously called it a direct violation of the NPT and insisting that all nuclear weapons be deployed within national territories.⁴⁸ Indeed, Russia and China highlighted this latter point at a summit between President Putin and President Xi Jinping in March 2023, and only days before the announcement that Russia would deploy tactical nuclear weapons to Belarus.⁴⁹

Russia's latest decision therefore represents a significant change in its nuclear policies and, while not a direct violation of the NPT, the same arguments about "bad faith implementation" of the treaty NPT could arguably now also be applied to Russia and Belarus.⁵⁰

⁴⁴ US Office of the Historian, [Letter from the Under Secretary of State to Secretary of Defense Clifford](#), 10 April 1968

⁴⁵ NATO, [NATO-Russia relations: The facts](#) (accessed 28 June 2023)

⁴⁶ ["Nuclear sharing in NATO, is it legal?"](#), Berlin Information Center for Transatlantic Security, April 2001

⁴⁷ NATO, Strategic Concept 2022, para.29

⁴⁸ ["The NPT and the origins of NATO's nuclear sharing arrangements" \(PDF\)](#), Institut français des relations internationales, February 2017

⁴⁹ ["Russia, China convinced that nuclear war must never be unleashed – joint statement"](#), TASS Russian News Agency, 21 March 2023

⁵⁰ ["Russia is deploying nuclear weapons in Belarus: NATO shouldn't take the bait"](#), Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists, April 2023

What has been the response?

Russia already has Iskander-M dual-capable missiles deployed in Kaliningrad and it is widely assumed that nuclear weapons are stationed there.⁵¹ The deployment of the Iskander missile system to Belarus therefore does little to extend Russia's nuclear reach into Europe, although from an operational perspective having nuclear capable systems in multiple places is recognised as enhancing Russia's nuclear deterrence.⁵²

Several analysts have also questioned the use of the Su-25 for the nuclear role, despite conversion being faster and cheaper (see [footnote 30](#)), given that the Su-25 is an ageing close air support fighter.⁵³

What is widely accepted is that the announcement of the deployment of nuclear weapons in Belarus has not come as a surprise, having been on the cards since the end of 2021. On that basis, Russia's latest announcements have been widely regarded by western analysts as political posturing and one more step in President Putin's campaign of nuclear intimidation vis-à-vis NATO and its support for Ukraine.⁵⁴

The timing of Russia's announcements also notably coincide with the approval of [a new Strategic Concept for NATO](#) (in June 2022) and [the adoption of new regional plans](#) that will enhance NATO's readiness and presence on its eastern flank (which are expected to be approved at the NATO summit in Vilnius in early July 2023).

What has the US and NATO said?

Despite President Biden suggesting that the nuclear threat from Russia is "real",⁵⁵ on 16 June 2023, the US Secretary of State, Anthony Blinken, said that the US saw no reason to adjust its own nuclear posture in response to the deployment of Russian tactical nuclear weapons in Belarus:

We'll continue to monitor the situation very closely and very carefully. We have no reason to adjust our own nuclear posture. We don't see any indications that Russia is preparing to use a nuclear weapon. The President

⁵¹ See "[Lithuanian officials puzzled by Russia's threats to deploy nuclear weapons in Kaliningrad](#)", LRT, 14 April 2022 and "[Why is Kaliningrad at the center of a new Russia-NATO faceoff?](#)", Brookings Institution, June 2022

⁵² "[Russia-Belarus nuclear sharing would mirror NATO's - and worsen Europe's security](#)", Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists", 1 July 2022

⁵³ "[Russia is deploying nuclear weapons in Belarus: NATO shouldn't take the bait](#)", Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists, April 2023

⁵⁴ See: "[Russia-Belarus nuclear sharing would mirror NATO's - and worsen Europe's security](#)", Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists", 1 July 2022; "[The insignificance of Putin's latest nuclear bluster](#)", European Council on Foreign Relations, 31 March 2023 and Kier Giles, [Russian nuclear intimidation](#), 29 March 2023

⁵⁵ "[Biden says threat of using tactical nuclear weapons is 'real'](#)", Reuters, 20 June 2023

said again this week that we remain committed to the defense of NATO – every inch of its territory – so that is our north star and we're very focused on that.⁵⁶

This view has been mirrored by NATO. In March 2023 the alliance condemned Russia's nuclear rhetoric as “dangerous and irresponsible” and said it was closely monitoring the situation.⁵⁷ Following a meeting of NATO Defence Ministers on 16 June 2023, NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg said:

On Belarus, I will not go into the detail, except for saying that, of course, we take it seriously when Russia has announced they will deploy nuclear weapons to Belarus. We have seen some preparations going on. We will monitor closely what they are doing and we will remain vigilant. And of course, this is part of nuclear messaging and nuclear rhetoric that we have seen over some time, a part of a pattern we have seen over several years, where Russia has modernised nuclear weapons, deployed more nuclear weapons – also up in the High North – but now also for the first time permanently deploying weapons to Belarus.

So far, we haven't seen any changes in the Russian nuclear posture, deployments, which requires any changes in our posture, but we will constantly assess what to do, and this was also one of the issues discussed in the Nuclear Planning Group today.⁵⁸

The issue will be discussed by NATO leaders at the alliance summit in Vilnius on 10-11 July 2023.

The EU High Representative, Josep Borell, has also condemned Russia's decision which he said went against all commitments undertaken in the 1994 Budapest Memorandum and was a “step which will lead to further extremely dangerous escalation”.⁵⁹ In March 2023, Borrell indicated that in the face of such a threat to European security, the EU could respond with further sanctions.⁶⁰

Position of the British Government

In March 2023 the UK's -Deputy Permanent Representative to the United Nations, James Kariuki, said:

since the beginning of Russia's illegal invasion of Ukraine, President Putin has used irresponsible nuclear rhetoric.

Let us be clear:

No other country has raised the prospect of nuclear use in this conflict.

⁵⁶ US Department of State, [Joint Press Availability](#), 16 June 2023

⁵⁷ NATO Spokesperson Oana Lungescu (@NATOpres), [Twitter](#), 26 March 2023 (accessed 28 June 2023)

⁵⁸ NATO, [Press conference](#), 16 June 2023

⁵⁹ EU External Action Service, [Press release](#), 26 May 2023

⁶⁰ EU High Representative Josep Borrell Fontelles (@JosepBorrellF), [Twitter](#), 26 March 2023 (accessed 28 June 2023)

No one is threatening Russia's sovereignty.

It is Russia who has violated the UN Charter by invading another sovereign country.

President Putin's announcement on 25 March is his latest attempt to intimidate and coerce. This has not worked and will not work. We will continue to support Ukraine's efforts to defend itself.⁶¹

Following events at the end of June 2023 which saw the leader of the Wagner Group, Yevgeny Prigozhin, exiled to Belarus after attempting an armed rebellion in Russia, questions were once again raised over the role of Belarus in the Ukraine conflict and as a host for Russian nuclear weapons. In response, Foreign Secretary James Cleverly said:

It is, of course, a deep concern when we see Russia trying to use Belarus as a sort of satellite state or, indeed, a place to put its nuclear weapons. We keep that under constant review, and we make sure, in the strongest possible terms, that Belarus is aware of the international concerns about its behaviour.⁶²

President Lukashenko has since said that the Wagner Group will have no role in the guarding of Russian nuclear weapons on Belarusian territory.⁶³

China

As outline above, the March 2023 announcement by the Kremlin came only days after a joint statement by the Russian and Chinese Presidents calling on all nuclear weapon states not to deploy such weapons beyond national territories.

In response to Russia's subsequent announcement a spokesperson for the Chinese Foreign Ministry did not reference that statement and instead called on all sides to work towards peace in Ukraine:

In January last year, the leaders of the five nuclear-weapon states released a joint statement, in which they affirmed that a nuclear war cannot be won and must never be fought and stressed the importance of the avoidance of war between nuclear-weapon states and the reduction of strategic risks. Under the current circumstances, all sides need to focus on making diplomatic efforts towards a peaceful settlement of the Ukraine crisis and work together for deescalation.⁶⁴

⁶¹ Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office, [Speech at the UN Security Council](#), 31 March 2023

⁶² [HC Deb 26 June 2023](#), c19

⁶³ ["Lukashenko: Wagner will not guard any nuclear weapons deployed to Belarus"](#), Meduza, 27 June 2023

⁶⁴ Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, [Regular press conference](#), 27 March 2023

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