

Russian nuclear roulette? Elites and public debates on nuclear weapons in Moscow after Ukraine

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Abstract

How has Russia's invasion of Ukraine influenced domestic debates on nuclear strategy in Russia? Western scholars and analysts have voiced the concern that as Russian conventional capabilities deteriorate due to the war, its reliance on non-strategic nuclear weapons could grow. Contrary to this expectation, this article argues that a close reading of political and military elites' nuclear debates suggests more continuity than change in the role of nuclear weapons in Russia's security strategy. By analyzing the Kremlin's nuclear signaling, strategic deliberations among military elites, and public exchanges among policy analysts in the first 18 months of the war, it finds that there has been a significant increase in nuclear discourse at all these levels. Nevertheless, the select voices among policy analysts calling for a lowering of the nuclear threshold diverge from the signaling by the political leadership and the debates among military elites.

Keywords: Russia, nuclear weapons, deterrence, strategy

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