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Russia's campaign of deterrence and intimidation

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Between 28 September and 4 October, Russia repeatedly signalled its readiness to use nuclear weapons against NATO and its member states. First, the Russian Embassy in Belgium publicly announced that it had conveyed its position to NATO's International Staff and the Belgian Foreign Ministry regarding the Alliance's "provocative statements and actions" concerning the Kaliningrad region. It threatened to use its "entire arsenal" in response to any potential aggression or attempt to isolate the region from Russia. Subsequently, Russian diplomatic missions in London and Dublin reiterated these threats, specifying that Russia could employ nuclear weapons and target decision-making centres within NATO countries.

The document delivered to NATO has not been made public. However, on 30 September, Reuters reported that it had seen the letter, which contained both of the elements indicated above. NATO responded to the Kremlin by stressing its defensive nature and calling on Moscow to stop issuing threats. On the same day, the Russian Foreign Ministry signalled that arms production facilities in Europe supplying Ukraine could become potential targets for Russian strikes. In addition, on 1 October, Vladimir Putin reiterated Russia's preparedness to use all available forces and means in the event of an attack on its territory, specifically referencing the Kaliningrad region. At the same time, he denied that the Russian Foreign Ministry's letter had explicitly mentioned the use of nuclear weapons. Nikolai Patrushev, Putin's adviser and former Secretary of Russia's Security Council, echoed these remarks during his visit to the Kaliningrad region.

Although references to nuclear escalation are a recurring feature of Russian rhetoric, the current method and pretext are significant. The sequence of mutually reinforcing messages indicates that Moscow is leveraging the threat of escalation, including nuclear escalation, to heighten the perceived risks associated with NATO activities in the Baltic Sea region. The campaign aims to deter NATO member states from further reinforcing the eastern flank and to intimidate Western societies in order to discourage them from supporting Ukraine. A further objective may be to dissuade countries in the region from intensifying measures against the so-called shadow fleet.

Commentary

- **Russia seeks to constrain NATO activities in the Baltic Sea region, as well as the Alliance's planned and ongoing long-term initiatives to strengthen the defence capabilities of eastern flank countries.** The Kremlin hopes to reduce NATO's activity, including exercises, and its military presence on the eastern flank. To this end, Russia

attempts to portray the Alliance's defensive measures as preparations for a blockade of the Kaliningrad region or a direct attack, thereby creating a rationale for a possible asymmetric response involving nuclear weapons. By doing so, Moscow seeks to increase uncertainty regarding its potential response and expand the range of actions perceived as carrying a risk of escalation. The inconsistent messaging from Putin and the Russian Foreign Ministry may form part of a deterrence strategy designed to elevate perceived risk while retaining the option of backing away from the most extreme response.

- **Moscow is exerting psychological pressure on Western societies in an effort to intensify fears of being 'dragged into a war'.** To this end, it exploits its advantages in cognitive operations and seeks to transform public concern into a belief that any NATO action viewed negatively by Russia could trigger an escalation spiral that would be difficult to contain. The aim is therefore to focus public debate on the low but irreducible risk of conflict with a nuclear power. The Kremlin also hopes to reinforce the perception among international audiences, particularly in the Global South, that Russia's actions are purely defensive responses to the West's aggressive policies.

- **The escalation in Russian rhetoric is also intended to dissuade Western political elites from maintaining support for Ukraine.** References to the potential use of nuclear weapons are designed to increase the political cost of such support and to fuel public controversy surrounding debates over its future scope. Warnings that European facilities producing weapons for Ukraine could become targets of Russian strikes are intended to serve a similar purpose.

- **Moscow is also likely attempting to deter actions targeting the so-called shadow fleet.** This is indicated by Putin's remarks linking the detention of Russian vessels by Western authorities (with more than a dozen such cases in 2026 in the Baltic, the Atlantic and the Mediterranean) to the possibility of Russian retaliation (such attempts have already been recorded in the Baltic). The Baltic Sea serves as a critical export route for Russia, accounting for approximately 50% of its seaborne crude oil and petroleum product exports to international markets in 2025.
- **Russian attempts to intimidate NATO, including repeated nuclear threats, have largely proven ineffective.** Since Russia's annexation of Crimea, the Alliance has gradually increased its military presence and activity on its north-eastern and eastern flanks. Following Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, Finland and Sweden joined NATO, while the Alliance adopted regional defence plans and has steadily developed a command and force structure designed for a conventional conflict with a peer adversary. In 2025, NATO members adopted an ambitious plan to increase defence spending to 5% of GDP by 2035. Russia has also failed to halt military support for Kyiv: as US assistance has been scaled back, Europe has increased its contribution. Russia's actions may reflect a response to the Alliance signalling more firmly the costs Moscow would incur if it took aggressive action. This was demonstrated, among other things, by NATO air force exercises near the Kaliningrad region and over the Barents Sea in August this year.