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THREAT TO THE US' NUCLEAR ORDER: CHINA AND RUSSIA DETERRENCE CRISIS 2024

ЗАГРОЗА ЯДЕРНОМУ ПОРЯДКУ США: КРИЗА СТРИМУВАННЯ КИТАЮ ТА РОСІЇ У 2024

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Abstract. *In this article, the author provides a detailed argumentation of the level of nuclear threat from Russia in the context of conventional aggression against Ukraine, analyzing acts of military cooperation and related military exercises with China where both countries of the authoritarian bloc use nuclear carriers. The author also partially compares the level of nuclear capabilities of both superpowers of the totalitarian bloc as part of the argumentation of the thesis about the need to focus NATO's attention on a higher priority threat from Russia than on challenges and threats from China. The author considers the chronological framework of 2023-2024. To effectively identify and prioritize the level of threats, the author uses the case study method, as well as the content analysis method when working with documents and official statements of representatives of the countries that are the object of this study. The author also analyzes the technical capabilities of certain nuclear carriers that Russia and China actively use in exercises and in the war in Ukraine. The theoretical basis of this work is structural realism, the theory of "ideological allies" by Mark Haas and the concept of the Heartland by Halford Mackinder, which argue for the trends of increasing geopolitical appetites of Russia, as well as the systematic involvement of allies in the bloc of authoritarian states. According to the results of this study, the author proves the thesis that Russia is the undisputed number one nuclear and conventional threat to NATO countries, as well as their allies. Therefore, the trend of reorienting and prioritizing the foreign policy of nuclear deterrence of the United States towards China may be a wrong step in view of the future potential escalation of military actions by Russia and its totalitarian bloc against democratic countries of the West, primarily in Europe.*

Keywords: *US nuclear policy, Russian nuclear deterrence, Chinese nuclear deterrence, NATO, strategic stability in Europe, international security.*

Анотація. *У даній статті автор наводить докладну аргументацію рівня ядерної загрози з боку росії у контексті конвенційної агресії проти України, аналізуючи акти мілітарного співробітництва та суміжних воєнних навчань із Китаєм де обидві країни авторитарного блоку використовують ядерні носії. Також автор частково порівнює рівень ядерної спроможності обох наддержав тоталітарного блоку в рамках аргументації тези про необхідність зосереджені уваги НАТО на більш пріоритетній загрозі з боку росії, ніж на викликах та загрозах з боку Китаю. Автор бере до аналізу хронологічні рамки 2023-2024 роки. Задля ефективною ідентифікації та пріоритетизації рівня загроз автор використовує метод кейс стаді, а також метод контент аналізу при роботі із документами та офіційними заявами представників країн, які є об'єктом даного дослідження. Також автор аналізує технічні спроможності певних ядерних носіїв, які росія та Китай активно використовують у навчаннях, та у війні в Україні. Теоретичним підґрунтям даної роботи є*

структурний реалізм, теорія «ідеологічних союзників» Марка Хааса та концепція Хартленду Хелфорда Маккіндера, які аргументують тенденції підвищення геополітичних апетитів росії, а також системність залучення союзників до блоку авторитарних держав. Згідно результатів даного дослідження автор доводить тезу, що росія є беззаперечною ядерною та конвенційною загрозою номер один по відношенню до країн НАТО, а також їх союзників. Тому тенденція реорієнтації і пріоритизації зовнішньої політики ядерного стримування США на Китай може бути хибним кроком з огляду на майбутню потенційну ескалацію воєнних дій росії та їх тоталітарного блоку проти демократичних країн Заходу в першу чергу у Європі.

***Ключові слова:** ядерна політика США, ядерне стримування росії, ядерне стримування Китаю, НАТО, стратегічна стабільність в Європі, міжнародна безпека.*

Introduction. The year 2024 marked a pivotal moment for the world's leaders, as it became clear that the time to choose their alliance is approaching - the US defence coalition consists of NATO, AUKUS and bilateral agreements with regional allies as Israel, South Korea or Japan. The main purpose of these cohesive formations is military cooperation in response to any threat against the sovereignty of these states (Narang & Vaddi, 2024). And the main threatening complex object to their national security and geopolitical interest is the bloc of authoritarian countries coalescing around russia's and China's nuclear arms potential and global influence. The fact of russian nuclear collaboration with Iran and North Korea in exchange of missiles or soldiers to use against Ukraine, as well as relocation of russian tactical nuclear arms and carriers to Belarus are significant and urgent destabilising factors for the existing international non-proliferation regime (Skrypnyk & Skrypnyk, 2024). Military aggression against Ukraine and tendency of uniting authoritarian actors of the international arena with the aim to change the existing geopolitical order to satisfy russian political and strategic ambitions. These vector of development of international affairs poses one of the most significant threats to the strategic security and stability of all democratically oriented parts of the world since the Second World War, because Nuclear Weapons have never been so frequently leveraged as tools of coercion, in the context of conventional military conflicts, to achieve their authoritarian leaders' geopolitical objectives, taking into consideration the Caribbean Crisis of the 1962 (Waltz, 1981). This is a great practical example of how Kenneth Waltz's structural realism works in the empirical layer. However, this trend may end if the United States of America restores international security and stability to the global multipolar geopolitical arena by improving its Nuclear Deterrence Policy and enhancing approach to deter russia from further escalations against Europe (Payne & Trachtenberg, 2022).

The purpose of the study is to strengthen the EU defence position by analysing and emphasising on the most actual nuclear threats from russia and China in 2024 against the democratic states of the West.

Recent literature review. This article covers the analysis of a wide range of security issues of the EU and NATO, therefore, in the context of this study, it is necessary to note not only the work on nuclear security, non-proliferation and deterrence, but also research on international stability and the security of the EU and NATO countries as a whole. Some of the most relevant works on NATO security and military threats and challenges from Russia belong to the following researchers: Alexandra Gheciu (2022), who concentrates her research on topics such as multilateralism and international institutions: NATO, European Union, Organization for Security And Cooperation in Europe, United Nations Global Governance International Security. Benjamin Schreer (2022) who is a head of European Security and Defense Program And expertise on defense policy and Indo-Pacific strategic affairs, NATO and German defense policy. On the theory of nuclear deterrence and non-proliferation, the works of foreign scientists are considered: Amy Wolf (2023), who is a researcher at the U.S. Congress on the U.S., russia and China Nuclear Arsenal Programs, Strategic Arms Control and U.S.-russian Arms Control Policy; Scott Sagan (1983), whose work focuses on U.S. foreign policy and nuclear deterrence; Heather Williams (2014) researches international security and nuclear nonproliferation issues in Eastern Europe; Jonathan Eyall (1987) during recent

years, he has been researching the possible consequences of Iran's Nuclear program for Europe, as well as Russia's nuclear threats in the context of its invasion of Ukraine; Eric Heginbotham (2004) examines China's nuclear deterrence, as well as US-China relations in the geopolitical direction; Bruce Bennett (1979) is an expert on nuclear non-proliferation and deterrence in the Northeast Asian direction, namely North Korea, China, Japan, and South Korea. Ukrainian researchers who consider the nuclear policy of the United States, including through the problem of non-proliferation, it is worth mentioning Sergei Galaka (2011), Polina Sinovets (2017) and Tetyana Melnyk (2021) among others.

US trigger "The president recently issued updated nuclear-weapons employment guidance to account for multiple nuclear-armed adversaries," stated Vipin Narang, an MIT nuclear strategist who formerly served in the Pentagon, before returning to academia earlier this month (Narang & Vaddi, 2024). "And in particular," he further specified, the weapons guidance accounted for "the significant increase in the size and diversity" of China's nuclear arsenal (Narang, 2024). In June 2024, the National Security Council's senior director for arms control and nonproliferation, Pranay Vaddi, referenced the document as the first to thoroughly examine whether the United States is prepared to respond to nuclear crises that may occur either simultaneously or sequentially, using a combination of nuclear and non-nuclear weapons (Narang & Vaddi, 2024). Mr. Vaddi stated that the new strategy emphasises "the need to deter Russia, the PRC and North Korea simultaneously," with "PRC" referring to the People's Republic of China (Narang & Vaddi, 2024). President Biden's administration has already taken core steps and implemented some crucial updates to the U.S. Nuclear Strategy as of March 2024, which were announced in a New York Times report on the 20th of August 2024; however, these documents have not yet been reflected in the U.S. Nuclear Posture Review documents (Narang & Vaddi, 2024). Moreover, the Russian threat is escalating due to the increasing number of their conventional and military exercises which continue to get closer and closer in proximity to the NATO member state's borders. Are these manoeuvres merely acts of strategic intimidation without genuine intention to attack NATO - or do they represent ongoing preparations for a total war of Totalitarian Bloc countries against the Western Democratic Bloc states affiliated with NATO ?

Totalitarian Bloc Response

Following this NYT report, China, now seriously alarmed by the news indicating the United States approved a nuclear strategic plan to focus on China's rapid expansion of its nuclear arsenal, issued an official reaction by the Chinese foreign ministry spokesperson: "The U.S. is peddling the China nuclear threat narrative, finding excuses to seek strategic advantage" (Chu, Orr, Perry & Wong, 2024). North Korea also issued an official statement through its Minister of Foreign Affairs: "The DPRK will as ever bolster up its strategic strength in every way to control and eliminate all sorts of security challenges that may result from the U.S. dangerous nuclear posture readjustment, and resolutely counter any type of nuclear threat," the foreign ministry said, using North Korea's official name (Reuters, 2024). The Ministry also added to the major statement: "Other sovereign states' efforts for bolstering up their defence capabilities to cope with the ever-increasing nuclear threat from the U.S. can never be a pretext for its nuclear arms buildup for aggression and provocative coordination of nuclear posture". In contrast to China, the North Korean Ministry issued a response that was notably more detailed and emotionally charged: "No matter how desperately the U.S. may exaggerate the 'nuclear threat' from other countries, the DPRK will push forward the building of nuclear force sufficient and reliable enough to firmly defend the sovereignty and security interests of the country on its fixed timetable" (Reuters, 2024).

Despite the renewed focus of the U.S. nuclear strategy being redirected from Russia to China, Russia, the second most capable nuclear state after the U.S., stated: "On the first of September 2024 Russia announced that it was decided to make changes to its doctrine on the use of nuclear weapons in response to what it regards as Western escalation in the war in Ukraine, state media quoted Deputy Foreign Minister Sergei Ryabkov" (Reuters, 2024). Taking into account Putin's background of nuclear threats and intimidation towards the Western bloc, it is reasonable to presume that he is inclined to upgrade Russia's nuclear arms capabilities. It is increasingly likely that President Biden's

nuclear posture update has already triggered the inception of a new nuclear arms race between the U.S., China and Russia. Additionally, it is essential to consider Russia's active collaboration with Iran and North Korea in military cooperation and technology exchange necessary for the production and implementation of a nuclear arsenal (Skrypnyk & Skrypnyk, 2024).

Nuclear Precedents of China and Russia in 2024

In the context of the renewal of the U.S. Nuclear Strategy it is of significance to emphasise the most recent acts of potential nuclear intimidation from the primary threatening powers within U.S. national interests and strategic stability. These threats correlate with the actual Nuclear Deterrence Strategy, which provides a strong argument of the aforementioned theses and official statements, however they require enhanced concept of response. (Nuclear Posture Review, 2010).

Approximately one month before the New York Times announcement of President Biden's "Nuclear Employment Guidance" on the 24th of July, the North American Aerospace Defense Command (NORAD) successfully intercepted a formation of nuclear-capable bombers consisting of two Chinese Xian H-6K bombers and two Russian Tu-95MS Bear bombers operating in close proximity to Alaskan airspace. The interception was conducted through a coordinated effort involving American F-16 and F-35 fighter aircrafts, alongside Canadian CF-18 fighter jets. To gauge the potential threat of at least one of these bombers, it is important to consider its nuclear arms capabilities: "Fitted with new electronics and upgraded targeting systems, the more modern Tu-95MS can carry 16 200-kiloton nuclear AS-15 Kent cruise missiles. To put this into perspective, each atomic cruise missile is ten times more powerful than the 10,000-pound 'Fat Man' nuclear bomb the Americans dropped on Nagasaki in 1945" (Bingen, MacKenzie & Williams, 2024).

Another fact of Russian nuclear threat activity was published in May 2024, highlighting the importance of analysing how Russia's nuclear arsenal is integrated into its broader military regime, as reflected in its recent tactical drills (Trevelyan, 2024). Russia's recent tactical nuclear drills, which represent a significant escalation in its military posture, particularly in the context of the ongoing conflict in Ukraine. The drills involve nuclear-capable Kinzhal and Iskander's missiles, which are designed for battlefield use and are classified as non-strategic, or tactical, nuclear weapons. These weapons are distinct from strategic nuclear weapons, which are intended for long-range strikes and have the capacity to destroy entire cities. The inclusion of Kinzhal and Iskander missiles in the drills is notable. The Kinzhal is a hypersonic air-launched ballistic missile with a range of up to 2,000 kilometres, capable of carrying nuclear warheads up to 500 kilotons each (Hambling, 2024). The Iskander, a short-range ballistic missile system, also can be equipped with nuclear warheads and is known for its precision and ability to evade missile defences.

The use of these systems in the drills suggests that Russia is preparing for scenarios in which it could employ tactical nuclear weapons to attain specific military objectives on the battlefield. By focusing on tactical nuclear weapons, Russia is signalling a potential shift in its nuclear doctrine. Traditionally, tactical nuclear weapons have been viewed as tools for deterrence, meant to prevent an adversary from escalating a conflict to a full-scale war. However, the public announcement of these drills, along with the specific mention of "preparation and use" of such weapons, implies that Russia is considering their operational use in the context of the war in Ukraine. This development is concerning because it lowers the threshold for nuclear use, increasing the risk of nuclear weapons being employed in a conventional conflict. Tactical nuclear weapons are often seen as more "usable" due to their lower yield and shorter range compared to strategic nuclear weapons. However, any use of nuclear weapons, regardless of yield or range, would have profound and potentially catastrophic consequences, both militarily and politically (Freedman, 1981).

In the context of Russian tactical nuclear arms capabilities and intentions, it is worth mentioning the relocation of some tactical nuclear stockpiles to Belarus in 2023 (Federation of American Scientists, 2023). The relocation of these stockpiles brings the threat significantly closer to the NATO borders, posing a considerable nuclear threat to the European Union and the Baltic states. The Belarusian military has completed what appears to be a new housing facility for the allegedly nuclear-capable Iskander missile launchers it received from Russia. According to a statement from The Federation of American Scientists, this is the "first time since the Cold War that

russians equipping another country to launch its nuclear weapons and undercut russian criticism of U.S. nuclear sharing arrangements with NATO allies” (Kristensen, 2023).

What about russia's long-range nuclear capabilities? The situation remains the same - active development and huge budgeting - resulting in terrifying and impressive outcomes from a nuclear weapon analysis perspective. “Two U.S. researchers say they have identified the probable deployment site in russia of the 9M730 Burevestnik, a new nuclear-powered, nuclear-armed cruise missile touted by President Vladimir Putin as ‘invincible’” (Reuters, 2024).



Source: the image obtained by Reuters on August 27, 2024. Planet Labs PBC/Handout via REUTERS.

Using images taken on July 26th by Planet Labs, a commercial satellite firm, the two researchers identified a construction project abutting a nuclear warhead storage facility known by two names - Vologda-20 and Chebsara - as the new missile's potential deployment site. The facility is 295 miles (475 km) north of Moscow (Reuters, 2024). Decker Eveleth, an analyst at the CNA research and analysis organisation, discovered satellite imagery revealing what he believes to be nine horizontal launch pads under construction. “The reference to loitering has raised concerns that russia might launch Burevestnik missiles in a crisis, which could then cruise near U.S. and NATO targets while waiting for instructions. This would allow Moscow to strike quickly once orders are given, significantly shortening the amount of time NATO would have to react to russian aggression.” - Decker Eveleth stated in his article for a Foreign Policy. According to his assessment, these pads are organised into three groups, each enclosed by high berms for protection—either to shield them from potential attacks or to prevent an accidental explosion in one from triggering detonations in the others (Foreign Policy. 2024). The berms are connected by roads to what Eveleth identified as likely buildings for servicing the missiles and their components. Additionally, these roads connect to an existing complex of five nuclear warhead storage bunkers. Eveleth stated, “The site is intended for a large, fixed missile system, and the only large, fixed missile system russia is currently developing is the Skyfall” (Reuters, 2024).

The Burevestnik missile (also known as Skyfall) is a russian nuclear-powered cruise missile designed for intercontinental range capabilities (Foreign Policy, 2024). A 2020 report by the U.S. Air Force's National Air and Space Intelligence Center suggested that, if successfully deployed, the missile could offer russia a unique strategic capability. However, many experts have raised concerns about its practicality, given its troubled development history.

Given that 2024 is very rich in the development of the nuclear and military sectors, as well as the doctrines which include them, let us focus on the latter. For any concept, especially of a military nuclear nature, to pose a genuine threat, it must be implemented in practice and deployed on a massive scale. In July 2024, China and russia, as military allies conducted live-fire naval exercises in the South China Sea, underscoring the growing military cooperation between the two nations,

whose collaboration has significant implications for nuclear deterrence and strategic stability in the region. These exercises, which included live-fire drills and joint air defence and anti-submarine operations, demonstrate the increasing military integration between Russia's Pacific Fleet and China's People's Liberation Army Navy (PLA Navy). This cooperation is particularly noteworthy in the context of their "no limits" partnership, declared in 2022, which has deepened following U.S. and Western sanctions against Russia (Blanchard & Tung, 2024).



Source: Japan Self-defence Forces, Taiwan Ministry of Defence, Japanese media Jackie Gu, Reuters.

Certain manoeuvres, conducted during the aforementioned joint naval drills of the Chinese air forces, caused significant concern on the part of Taiwan. "The military has a detailed grasp of the activities in the seas and waters around the Taiwan Strait, including of the Chinese Communists' aircraft and ships," stated ministry spokesperson Sun Li-fang in an official statement (Blanchard & Tung, 2024). Taiwan's Ministry of Defense released two images: a grainy black-and-white photograph of a Chinese J-16 fighter jet and a colour photograph of a nuclear-capable H-6 bomber. The ministry confirmed that these images were taken recently, though it did not disclose the precise location or time of capture (Blanchard & Tung, 2024). "The Chinese Communists threat to regional stability continues to rise, and it's grey zone intrusions into the Taiwan Strait and surrounding areas are also increasing day by day, which are a common challenge to global democracy," President of Taiwan Lai Ching-te said in response to the heightened presence of Chinese military forces surrounding Taiwan in July 2024 (Blanchard & Tung, 2024).

From a nuclear military perspective, the joint exercises signal a potential shift in the strategic landscape, particularly regarding the projection of naval power and nuclear deterrence in the Indo-Pacific region. Both Russia and China possess significant nuclear arsenals, with Russia's Pacific Fleet being a critical component of its strategic nuclear forces. The presence of Russian naval assets, which are capable of deploying nuclear-armed cruise missiles, in conjunction with China's growing naval capabilities, may be interpreted as a message to the United States and its allies regarding the increasing military collaboration between these two nuclear powers. The anti-submarine drills are particularly significant in this context, as these submarines equipped with nuclear-tipped ballistic missiles (SSBNs) are a vital component of the nuclear deterrence strategies of both Russia and China. Through joint anti-submarine exercises, Russia and China are likely honing their ability to protect their own SSBNs while simultaneously developing potential strategies to counter those of their adversaries. This capability is essential for ensuring the survivability of their nuclear forces, the cornerstone of credible nuclear deterrence.

Moreover, the strategic timing and location of these exercises, particularly in the contested waters of the South China Sea, a region of immense geopolitical significance, further elevate their importance. The South China Sea is not only a critical maritime trade route but also serves as a strategic area where the U.S. and its allies, such as the Philippines, hold significant military and geopolitical interests. By conducting these drills in this region, Russia and China are not only asserting their presence but potentially demonstrating their ability to cooperate in the event of a regional conflict, including those that might involve nuclear elements.

It is also important to emphasise on the recent Russian naval exercises, from September the 10th to 16th, 2024. The "Ocean-2024" exercise, conducted by the Russian Navy represents the largest naval exercise undertaken by Russia in over three decades. Taking place across the Pacific and Arctic waters, the Mediterranean Sea, the Caspian Sea, and the Baltic Sea, the drills involve a reported 400 (different sources reporting around 300) combat ships, submarines, and support vessels, as well as 125 aircraft and helicopters. The exercise aims to evaluate the readiness of the Russian Navy and the Air and Space Forces, while also enhancing coordination with naval forces from partner countries, including China. The Russian Ministry of Defense has stated that the exercise involves over 90,000 soldiers, 7,000 combat and specialised vehicles, and encompasses a broad range of operational tasks, including the use of precision weapons and complex force control. Notably, China is participating with a contingent of four naval units, including a Type 055 destroyer and a Type 052D destroyer, as well as 15 aircraft, indicating a strengthening strategic partnership between the two nations (Defense News by Ed., 2024).

Despite the official figures provided, there is scepticism regarding the Russian Navy's ability to deploy the full extent of the stated assets. The current size of the Russian fleet is estimated at approximately 300 vessels of all classes, although the actual number of operational units is likely to be smaller. Therefore, although the scale of the exercise is substantial, it does not match the grandeur of Cold War-era manoeuvres it aims to emulate. The most significant aspect of Russia's naval power, as it was during the Cold War, remains its submarine fleet. Russian submarines continue to represent a substantial threat due to their ability to operate covertly and deliver strategic payloads, including ballistic missiles. The exercises likely emphasise these capabilities, maintaining a focus on underwater warfare and anti-submarine operations. President Vladimir Putin's remarks during the exercise reflect Russia's perception of a strategic contest with the United States, particularly in response to the U.S. military presence near Russia's western borders, the Arctic, and the Asia-Pacific region (Defense News by Ed., 2024). By conducting these drills, Russia aims to demonstrate its determination in achieving its geopolitical targets and military dominance in what it perceives as U.S. efforts to save global military-political affairs leadership. However, some argue that Putin is merely employing intimidation and bluffing tactics, prompting the question - what are his current "red lines" that could trigger him to act as an explicit military aggressor beyond the Ukrainian battlefields?

Leaked Russian Military Files

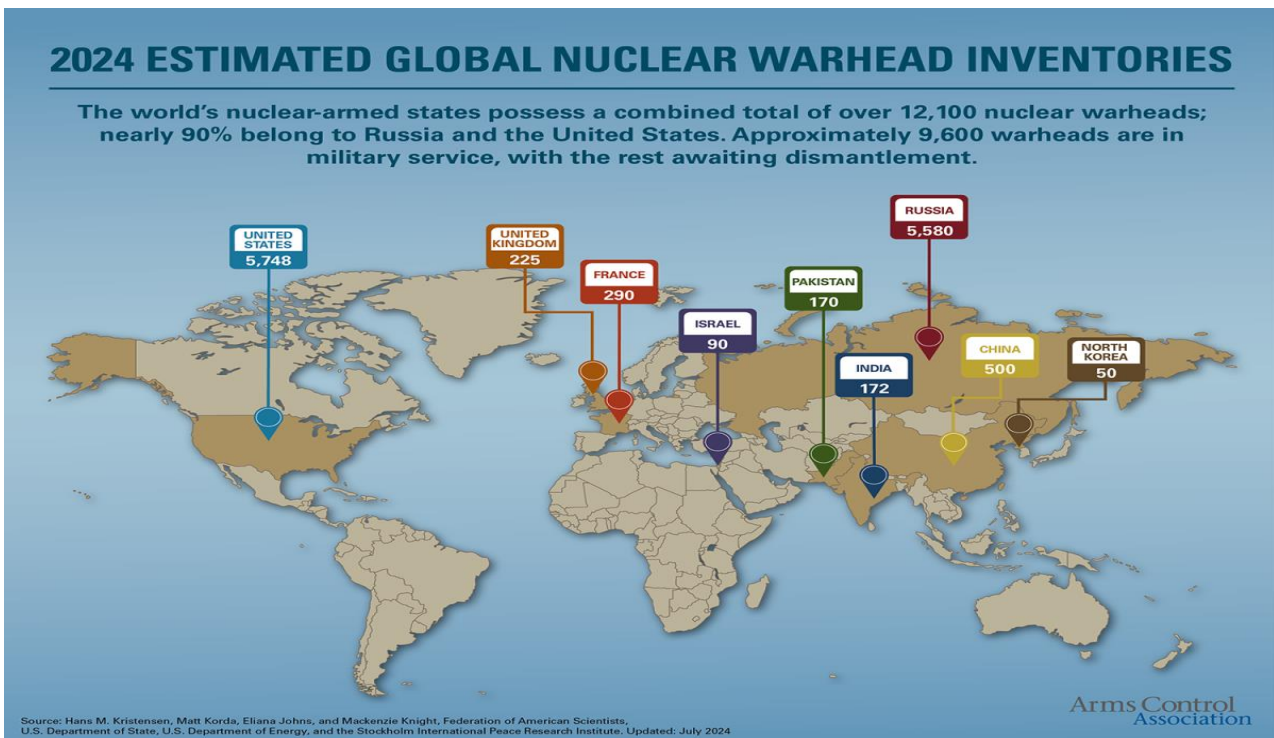
A February 2024 report by the Financial Times reveals alarmingly low thresholds for Russia's nuclear response, underscoring a high level of strategic vulnerability. The disclosure of classified Russian military documents, detailing scenarios from 2008 to 2014, suggests that the destruction of merely 20% of Russia's strategic ballistic missile submarines or 30% of its nuclear-powered attack submarines could trigger a nuclear response. This is particularly concerning given the limited size of Russia's current submarine fleet, which consists of 11 ballistic missile submarines and 17 nuclear-powered attack submarines (Cook & Seddon, 2024). The thresholds are significantly lower than the anticipated losses in a Taiwan conflict scenario, suggesting a potentially precarious stance in Russia's nuclear strategy, especially in light of its growing concerns regarding China. This low threshold for nuclear response not only highlights Russia's strategic concerns but also raises broader questions about the stability of global nuclear deterrence and the risks of escalation in a multi-polar nuclear world.

The analysis, based on Russian strategic documents from 2014, provides a concrete understanding of Russia's defensive posture with respect to China. These documents reveal that over

a decade ago, russia was acutely aware of the potential threat posed by China and had developed strategies to deter a surprise attack from its southeastern neighbour. The documents indicate that by 2015, russia had positioned two Dolgorukiy-class nuclear ballistic missile submarines and approximately six nuclear-powered attack and cruise missile submarines in the Pacific region. (Cook & Seddon, 2024) These assets were part of russia's broader strategy to counterbalance China's growing medium-range missile arsenal, which could pose a significant threat to russia's naval bases. However, the analysis suggests that while this deterrence seemed robust at the time, it may no longer be as effective today. China's nuclear forces have expanded significantly, undermining the deterrent value of russia's Pacific-based nuclear capabilities. The growing disparity in military power is amplified by China's increasing economic and cultural influence in russia's eastern territories, such as Vladivostok, where Chinese historical claims and current ties have become more pronounced.

The concern is that China's enhanced nuclear capacity, combined with its strategic patience and influence in the region, could allow it to effectively annex parts of russia's lightly defended eastern territories without direct military confrontation. The reference to russia's Crimean playbook implies that China might adopt similar hybrid tactics, leveraging local grievances, historical claims, and economic leverage, to achieve its territorial ambitions. This scenario raises significant doubts about the ongoing effectiveness of russia's nuclear deterrence as outlined in the 2014 documents, suggesting that the strategic calculus that once guided russia's defence planning may require urgent revision. However, China's potential nuclear and conventional military threats are primarily focused on Taiwan and Japan, while russia, as the world's second most powerful nuclear state, is engaged in a war against Western Democracies Bloc, including the United States. This thesis was explicitly stated by the russian president on the 12th of September, during the largest ongoing naval drills: "This will mean that NATO countries – the United States and European countries – are at war with russia. And if this is the case, then, bearing in mind the change in the essence of the conflict, we will make appropriate decisions in response to the threats that will be posed to us" (Conte & Schmitz, 2024). Putin's threat was in response to the Western Democracies alliance's intention to grant Ukraine pivotal permission to use long-range missiles deeper within russian territory. This move aims to neutralise russia's capabilities to demolish Ukrainian cities and energy infrastructure as the winter of 2024-2025 approaches. Therefore, in addition to the previously outlined borders and russia's very low threshold for using nuclear arms, we can add one more "red line" - comprehensive application of the long-range missile systems by Ukraine.

Conclusion. The main issue remains and requires additional concepts of response, because russian threat is currently the main factor of nuclear intimidation and strategic non-stability for the EU. Even when considering the total number of potential triggers for 2024 and excluding all of Putin's threats since the attack on Ukraine in 2022, russia has become much more explicitly provocative in terms of nuclear threats and intimidation since the beginning of 2024. Direct threats to use nuclear weapons as part of a blackmail strategy to deter NATO support for Ukraine. Most importantly, russia currently has almost 11 times more nuclear warheads than China.



Source: Arms Control Association

As illustrated in the image from the Arms Control Association, North Korea only has 50 warheads. While exact data regarding Iran's arsenal is not available, it is certain that Iran has fewer than North Korea. In contrast, China possesses approximately 500 warheads. These figures clearly indicate that Russia, with more than 5,000 nuclear warheads, is the leading power among totalitarian countries in terms of nuclear arms power (Arms Control Association, 2024). This includes direct, indirect, and potential nuclear threats to U.S. allies, who rely on security guarantees and the nuclear umbrella defence provided by the great Western ally of Europe. Regarding the development of military technologies, Russia was the primary supplier of nuclear weapons and carriers to China. This cooperation made China's nuclear capabilities technologically compatible with Russia's, enhancing their ability to confront common enemies or even to challenge the entire alliance. To strengthen the thesis stated below, we can provide an exemplifying argument with the nuclear carrier bombers, one of the modifications mentioned earlier in this article. In the mid-1950s, Russia provided China with nuclear-capable bomber technology, specifically through the transfer of technology and assistance for the Tupolev Tu-16. These bombers were critical in enabling China to develop its own long-range strategic bomber fleet. China used the technology and design framework from the Soviet Tu-16 to develop its own variant, which they named the Xian H-6. (Evans, 2024)

The significant developments in Russia's tactical and strategic nuclear arsenal, coupled with the ongoing practical testing of different types of potential nuclear carriers amid the massive war in Ukraine, cast doubts about the expediency of President Biden's decision. Prompting the European democratic states to seriously reconsider their own defence capabilities. There is growing concern regarding the viability of maintaining an independent nuclear deterrent against Russia without U.S. support, as well as the effectiveness of continuing to provide conventional aid to Ukraine. Ukraine, serving as Europe's primary line of defence against a potential Russian military invasion. Given Russia's capability to execute a further invasion of Europe, coupled with their policy of disregarding casualties in the war with Ukraine and the ability to recruit additional personnel due to the large amount of human resources potentially available, this situation warrants serious attention.

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