Weekly ICBM EAR Report

Image: Illustration of the Sentinel next-generation ICBM. Credit: Northrop Grumman - Space News

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Edition: Week of June 1, 2026

ICBM EAR Week of June 1, 2026 Prepared by Peter Huessy, President of Geostrategic Analysis, Senior Fellow at the Gold Institute for International Strategy, and Senior Fellow at the National Institute for Deterrence Studies

Quotes of the Week

Don Bacon (R-NE): "The HASC directed the USAF to look at any temporary facilities that will be needed to support the next-gen Airborne nuclear command and control aircraft."

Rep. George Whitesides (D-CA): "Helped secure HASC amendments [including to] ensure that decisions involving nuclear weapons remain in human hands, not AI."

White House: On an IAEA report that Iran is more at risk of going nuclear than before the war: "Stupid."

[Editor's Note: The IAEA also made the same claim after the Israeli strikes on the Iraqi (1981) and Syrian (2007) governments nuclear facilities suspected of being part of a covert nuclear weapons programs. IAEA and critics declared that both Iraq and Syria would double-down in the pursuit of nuclear weapons and put such programs underground and hidden from the gaze of the UN IAEA.]

Bloomberg News: "Satellite imagery appears to show construction at a square in central Pyongyang, fueling speculation that Chinese President Xi Jinping may soon make his first trip to North Korea in more than six years."

Congressional Developments

The House Armed Services Committee passed the FY27 National Defense Authorization Act by a vote of 44 to 12, sending the $1.15 trillion bill to the full House.

During consideration of the bill, the HASC added funds for the SLCM-N.

Rep. Don Bacon (R-NE): "The HASC adopted my #FY27NDAA amendment in the Readiness section to support the next-generation airborne nuclear command and control aircraft."

Don Bacon (R-NE): "Amdt. 5 adopted by HASC to direct the USAF to look at any temporary facilities that will be needed to support the next-gen Airborne nuclear command and control aircraft."

Rep. George Whitesides (D-CA): "Six hours into the NDAA markup and we're making progress. So far, I've helped secure amendments [including to] ensure that decisions involving nuclear weapons remain in human hands, not AI."

An Amendment to eliminate funds for Trump-class battleship failed in the HASC defense bill markup.

International Developments of Interest

There is a "growing fear" among European security officials that Russian President Vladimir Putin will attempt to "reshuffle the cards" by expanding the conflict in Ukraine to other parts of Europe.

In an effort to counter the threat of an invasion or blockade by China, Taiwan is aiming to increase its arsenal of powerful anti-ship missiles to more than 1,800 by early 2029.

Defense officials from Poland and Lithuania have confirmed that they are participating in discussions with the U.S. about their country's potential role in NATO's nuclear deterrence efforts in Europe.

A recent IAEA report says the risk that Iran is covertly pursuing nuclear weapons is higher today than before the United States and Israel launched strikes on the country's nuclear facilities.

North Korean leader Kim Jong Un inspected a new nuclear material production facility the South Korea's Joint Chiefs of Staff assessed that the site is a uranium enrichment plant.

President Vladimir Putin: Russia will bolster its air defenses to counter Ukrainian drone attacks. Russia has fired the Oreshnik intermediate range ballistic missile at targets in Ukraine in order to test its capability and precision before using it against objectives closer to residential areas.

Review Conference of the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT) at United Nations Headquarters in New York on May 22. The conference closed in deadlock after participants failed to adopt a final document. (©Kyodo)

Administration Developments

Under Secretary of State for Arms Control and International Security Thomas G. DiNanno: "The failure of States Parties to produce an agreed outcomes document from the 2026 NPT Review Conference is regrettable and alarming. Serial violators such as Iran must not be allowed to become a barrier to the functioning of this crucial international body."

"The Space Force has "very powerful cameras" monitoring Iran's destroyed nuclear sites and that there is no need to send U.S. troops to retrieve the uranium buried there at this time.

Report on PLA Theater Nuclear Weapons

Rick Fisher will speak June 18th at the next Triad Symposium at LSUS on China's nuclear threat. He recently told the ICBM EAR that the numbers and potential usage of China's theater nuclear forces have been the object of intensive disinformation and transparency denials. In a 2024 article for Taipei Times, Fisher notes that if one uses Victor Esin's average percentage for PLA theater nuke missiles, the PLA would have about 1000 nuke theater missiles today. Not counting other potential nuke armed SAMs, bombs, torpedoes, and mines...

Fisher explains:

"DoD has not yet commented publicly on PLAN ship/sub launched nuke cruise missiles, but such weapons would open up naval avenues for joint theater nuke cooperation. As for coordinated joint PLA-Russia use of theater nukes, this has to be taken as highly likely or near certain, following the 7/24 joint bomber exercise that saw Tu-95MSs and H-6Ks deploy to Anadyr airfield so close to Alaska. Russian sources in particular, have been open in commenting on Russia-China strategic defense exercises and Russian strategic radar tech transfers, so it is reasonable to suspect they have also been advancing "offensive" nuclear cooperation and theater nuclear weapon coordination if only to "deconflict" nuclear campaigns. Another possibility is that the PLA and Russia will use or coordinate with North Korean strategic and theater nuclear forces--the product of 2 decades of Chinese tech assistance."

Three Views on Extended Deterrence

In the following three essays we get three quite different views of the need for US extended deterrence for our allies and a formidable US presence overseas. **Frank Miller et al** argue that US nuclear deterrent policy is critical to the security of the Western world, and in particular avoiding the blackmail and coercion that may result from the US lack of regional/theater nuclear capability. However, Celese Wallender calls only for enhanced US conventional capability to support extended deterrence but not new nuclear capability. And finally, Rachel Metz of GWU argues that the network of conventional military bases which make up the core of the US conventional extended deterrent in Europe, the Middle East and Western Pacific, which Wallender wants to improve and keep strong, gets the US into reckless wars because since we have the capability to intervene overseas, we take the opportunity too often.

(1) Trump's Nuclear Review by Frank Miller, Eric Edelman and Madelyn Creedon, Vipin Narang and Keith Paune:

Defining U.S. Nuclear Deterrence Policy for an Uncertain World

It emerged last month in Congressional hearings that the Trump Pentagon is conducting a close hold mini review of U.S. nuclear strategy, as several of us had previously recommended. While not large enough to be styled a formal "Nuclear Posture Review" it will still have significant implications for how this Administration—and the United States going forward—envisions nuclear deterrence and assurance in a rapidly evolving, increasingly complex nuclear age. This isn't surprising as every U.S. Administration since the dawn of the atomic age has reviewed the strategy it inherited, and rightly so. While the participants in the review have not been identified in public testimony, to be compelling, even as a mini-review, it must include representatives from the Pentagon's Policy office (to include an appreciation of the Administration's world view), from the Joint Staff (to incorporate the perspective of the Joint Chiefs and of the combatant commands most directly concerned, namely Indo-Pacific Command and the European Command), U.S. Strategic Command (to ensure the feasibility of planning effectively for the concepts chosen), and the Department of Energy's National Nuclear Security Administration (to ensure any warhead decisions can be implemented). As senior participants in previous studies such as this—across both Republican and Democratic administrations—we would humbly offer some basic guideposts which we would urge the Pentagon to take into account as it proceeds with this review.

First, beware of "mirror-imaging." There is a long-standing tendency in the academic literature to treat the Russian and Chinese leadership as if they view the world through American eyes and share American norms regarding "reasonable" behavior. That tendency, past and present, leads to inadequate recommendations for U.S. strategies to deter because aggressive, autocratic opponents typically do not share U.S. perceptions and norms. To deter aggression against us and our allies, the United States must threaten to destroy ("hold at risk" in bureaucratic jargon) in the event deterrence fails, what enemy leaders value most. For the past five decades, the intelligence community reportedly has confirmed that Moscow and Beijing, including Putin and Xi today, place highest value on the survival of their regimes, the secret police and intelligence apparatus which sustains and supports the regime, key military capabilities (including their nuclear forces), and their defense industrial base to be those most valuable assets. Deprived of them, the modern Russian or Chinese state would disintegrate. As Henry Kissinger noted at the dawn of the missile age, deterrence "ultimately depends on an intangible quality: the state of mind of the potential aggressor" and as the 1983 report of the bipartisan Scowcroft Commission put it: "Deterrence… requires us to determine as best we can, what would deter [potential enemy leaders] from considering aggression, not what would deter us."' The implication of this reality for U.S. deterrence requirements is profound: It shapes the size and character of U.S. forces needed for credible deterrence beyond what otherwise might be our preferred minimum.

Second, any decision to modify this decades-long approach must advance a truly compelling rationale for change. New intelligence information or new interpretations of hostile leaders' value structures, while highly unlikely, are

not impossible. That said they must be based upon broadly agreed new facts which must be communicated clearly and compellingly to the American public, to our allies, and to potential enemies.

Third, if a deterrence strategy is to be effective, the United States must have a force with credible capability to implement the strategy. That force must have the requisite flexibility, survivability, diversity, and size to pose the threat necessary to deter different foes, acting together or separately, under all circumstances. Today our deterrent posture is weakened by two factors: growing obsolescence and a diminishing capacity relative to self-declared opponents. While Russia and China each began substantial campaigns shortly after the turn of the twenty-first century to fully modernize their nuclear forces, the United States essentially took a vacation from tending to our nuclear deterrent—what former CIA Director and Defense Secretary Robert Gates labeled our "holiday from history." As a result, we are now facing the task of replacing 1970's-1980's systems in each leg of our strategic triad simultaneously, thereby straining our defense industrial base. At the same time, it has become apparent that the aggressive and hegemonic aspirations of Putin and Xi, and their coordinated policies and actions on the world stage, require us to deter both Moscow and Beijing at the same time or, even worse, potentially in collusive sequence. The Chinese nuclear threat is no longer a "lesser included case" threat of the Russian one, resulting in the need to deter and achieve objectives against China and Russia simultaneously should deterrence fail.

The template for the strategic force we have today dates back to the late 2000s and only considered deterring what was deemed at the time to be a not particularly dangerous or aggressive Russia and a benign China. "Rogue" states and terrorists were thought to be the remaining sources of real threat, with an attendant significant reduction in the need for nuclear deterrence. The world of 2026 is starkly different and requires a force somewhat larger and certainly more diverse than the one contemplated 15 plus years ago. The needed growth may be modest and does not require us to match and mimic the combined number of Russian and Chinese warheads; in fact, the United States maintains fewer warheads and a smaller overall arsenal than Russia today and has for the past two decades. The United States needs to deploy only what is needed to meet targeting requirements under U.S. deterrence strategy. This can be gained initially by adding warheads and missiles from our reserve stockpile to the existing deployed force, as unanimously endorsed by several high-level bipartisan commissions over the last three years. This option can be accomplished relatively rapidly and at a modest cost. It likely will help mitigate the programmatic risks from production delays and technical challenges as we continue our plans to modernize the entire nuclear Triad. Failure to upload would indicate to both aggressors and partners that we are not serious about the possibility of foes' planned or opportunistic aggression against the United States or its allies, and thereby in the worst case would invite such attacks.

Fourth, following the end of the Cold War we paid scant attention to deterring nuclear blackmail or attack against our allies in Europe and in Asia --Russia was a "partner to NATO," North Korea was reclusive, and China was expected to rise peacefully--the breadth of China's ambitions was not yet apparent. As the Warsaw Pact disintegrated and the Soviet Empire receded from Eastern Europe, and with optimistic expectations for the future, Washington pursued a series of arms control agreements with Moscow that eliminated virtually all short- and medium range nuclear weapons in Europe. The United States dutifully carried out this obligation. Moscow did not. It broke those agreements and rebuilt its theater, or tactical, nuclear arsenal such that today Moscow has some 2000 fully modern land-, sea-, and air-launched nuclear systems, reportedly a 10:1 numeric advantage over the United States, which it is using today to bully and coerce our European allies and threaten American service members in Europe.

Over the past ten years, China also has built up a sizable force of short- and medium-range nuclear systems with which to threaten our Asian allies and U.S. forward bases. And we must not dismiss North Korea—Japan and South Korea do not. A modest number of American nuclear systems are deployed in Europe, and other than those on U.S. SSBNs, there are none in Asia. Both Moscow and Beijing appear to believe they can exploit this advantage in theater nuclear capabilities to coerce Washington and its allies. Given this backdrop, the United States urgently must field additional regional forces to convince both Moscow and Beijing that nuclear coercion is unacceptable and nuclear attack is a hopeless option. Key for credible U.S. extended deterrence now is the accelerated deployment of the proposed SLCM-N system, rapid development of an air-launched nuclear standoff weapon for U.S. and NATO F35 dual-capable aircraft and possibly developing and deploying a nuclear warhead for U.S. medium-range ground-launched systems.

Extending deterrence credibly to regional theaters is critical for the United States because, as the twentieth century twice demonstrated, world wars begin in regions where foes challenge our vital interests; they must be

deterred in those regions. Enabling adversaries to dominate key regions, including Europe and Asia, by ignoring deterrence gaps that pose existential threats to our allies and critical interests will surely end up involving us in war. Deterring aggression against our allies is key to deterring aggression against American vital interests and the homeland. Crucially, U.S. ability to extend nuclear deterrence across two oceans is connected to the ability to maintain central strategic deterrence and discourage attacks against the continental United States.

In addition, many allies fear that if we do not work to meaningfully "immunize" the U.S. homeland we would never risk a war—let alone a nuclear war—on their behalf. Deterring attack on the U.S. homeland is key to extending deterrence credibly to regions abroad and to assuring allies. In the absence of credible U.S. extended deterrence, allies will be tempted to acquire their own nuclear weapons to deter our common foes. The emergence of this dynamic can already be seen in South Korea, Japan, Poland, and even Germany. For example, Gen. Klaus Naumann, former Chief of German Armed Forces, reportedly has declared that Germany must have its own tactical nuclear weapons.

Consequently, U.S. nuclear strategy and forces which have kept the peace and been a critical brake on nuclear proliferation thus far—must be viewed holistically, especially when it comes to extended deterrence. Neither theater capabilities nor augmented strategic forces alone are sufficient for U.S. deterrence purposes given the rapidly expanding and broadening threats posed by Moscow and Beijing. New theater capabilities without additional strategic forces open up the space for an enemy to escalate until it holds the U.S. homeland at grave risk, and to decouple the United States from its allies. Additional strategic forces without adequate theater systems open the space for enemies' salami slicing attacks on allies, forcing a President to face the untenable choice of either "going big or going home." Strengthened U.S. nuclear deterrence capabilities, including strategic and theater forces, must free any president from facing that dilemma and allies from "going nuclear" for fear of an incredible U.S. extended deterrent. Turkey's unveiling of a prototype ICBM is also indicative of the kind of hedging strategies we are likely to see.

Two additional points bear mentioning with regard to theater deterrence. First, the aggregate number of new U.S. regional deterrent forces need not and should not match the combined (and bloated) levels to which Russian and Chinese systems have grown, but they do need to be sufficiently numerous, flexible and diverse to demonstrate that we have the capability to respond to – and therefore to deter – regional nuclear attacks.

Second, for those who hope to achieve an arms control regime governing regional nuclear systems – including Administration officials charged with developing a multilateral arms control strategy – until and unless we deploy systems that deny Moscow's strategy of nuclear coercion, Russia will not engage in a serious discussion of curbing and reducing theater and tactical range nuclear systems. Virtually the entire history of nuclear arms control with Moscow attests to that unfortunate reality. And of course, there is very little insight into what would motivate a currently uninterested China from coming to the negotiating table. That said, finding ways to promote strategic stability as discussed here should be pursued.

Finally, we note that the ultimate aim of a nuclear review is to produce a deterrence strategy that provides the President with the widest possible range of options necessary to deter the range of plausible attacks Moscow and Beijing (and Pyongyang) are capable of threatening, separately or in concert. Doing so requires a clear-eyed understanding of their aggressive agendas and coercive nuclear strategies--as opposed to regressive expectations built on mirror imaging and overly optimistic hopes. To best serve a President, the review participants should not, however, exclude options they believe a President would not favor – only a President can decide what is and is not acceptable.

A Pentagon study which acknowledges these guideposts should produce a nuclear deterrence strategy that contributes to keeping the peace through strength and a cap on nuclear proliferation for the remainder of this President's term and beyond. We wish its drafters well – the work they are doing is of the utmost importance.

(2) **Foreign Affairs Doesn't Disappoint**

America's Empire of Bases Makes It Easier to Blunder Into War

By Rachel Metz

The US has bases overseas to allow US deterrent forces to get to a crisis quicker than if all US forces had to come from the continental US. For nearly half a century, (1948-1991) the US base structure in Europe prevented a Soviet invasion and kept the peace. Such bases as the US also maintained in the ROK and Japan, for example, prevented war from breaking out in the Western Pacific also for 1953-2026, or 73 years, also an incredible accomplishment.

But according to an essay in Foreign Affairs, we might think of eliminating such bases because the current availability of such bases makes it more likely says Metz that it could make the US blunder into war, the very opposite of the objective of enhancing deterrence. Note also how the author describes the US as an "empire."

Japan at the NPT Review Conference calls for greater deterrence, says Arms Control Disappoints.

On May 22, the Review Conference of the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT) ended without adopting an outcome document outlining shared goals for all member states.

It was the third consecutive time that the conference, held once every five years, had collapsed without producing such a document. Many have warned that this marks a serious blow to the NPT framework, which is intended to advance nuclear disarmament and nonproliferation.

But Japan cannot afford to simply lament the failure. What it needs now is an effective nuclear deterrence posture. Above all, Japan should strengthen its alliance with the United States, which provides extended deterrence, to ensure that the country is not subjected to nuclear attack or nuclear coercion.

A Flawed Treaty Under Strain

The NPT is inherently unequal. It permits only the five "nuclear-weapon states"—the United States, Russia, Britain, France, and China—to possess nuclear arms, while denying that right to all other "non-nuclear-weapon states." Although the nuclear-weapon states are obliged to pursue nuclear disarmament negotiations in good faith, progress has been painfully slow.

Outcome documents at NPT Review Conferences are adopted by consensus. In this case, the United States pushed for wording stating that Iran's development or possession of nuclear weapons could not be tolerated. Iran, which maintains that its nuclear program is solely for peaceful use, and Russia demanded that the language be removed. The resulting standoff prevented the document from being adopted.

Iran's acquisition of nuclear weapons could pose a threat to the entire world. It is regrettable that the conference failed to adopt an outcome document that addressed the issue.

Even so, it is difficult to believe that such a document would have done much to advance nuclear disarmament. When the world had only two nuclear superpowers—the United States and the Soviet Union, later Russia—there was still room for arms reduction.

Today, however, there are three major nuclear powers: the United States, Russia, and China. Each must take into account the nuclear forces of the other two, making negotiations extraordinarily difficult. China, meanwhile, is rapidly expanding its own nuclear arsenal and has shown little appetite for joining such talks.

The draft outcome document had other problems as well. In the final version, for example, language rejecting North Korea's possession of nuclear weapons was removed at Russia's request.

Deterrence Still Matters

Until midway through the negotiations, the draft even included language proposed by China on the no-first-use of nuclear weapons. When an aggressor is prepared to attack with overwhelming conventional force, leaving open the possibility of nuclear retaliation can, in practice, help deter aggression.

That was the reality in Europe after World War II. Nuclear forces also help deter the use of other weapons of mass destruction, including biological and chemical weapons. Abandoning these forms of deterrence would be far too dangerous.

Given the current level of science and technology, nuclear deterrence remains essential to preventing the horrors of nuclear war. Any serious pursuit of peace must be grounded in that reality.

Celeste Wallander Correctly Calls for US Support for European Deterrence but misses the need to enhance escalation dominance with both conventional and theater nuclear additions to US forces.

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President Donald Trump is making a dangerous bet in Europe. This month, the United States announced that it was canceling the deployment of a long-range precision strike battalion to Germany and withdrawing some 5,000 troops from the country. It also abruptly canceled a rotational 4,000-to-5,000-strong combat team bound for Poland, following the earlier cancellation of a similar deployment to Romania in 2025. (The White House has suggested that new forces may still go to Poland but has not specified whether those would come from the United States or be redirected from Germany.) This week, European allies have told media that the Pentagon has informed NATO that it will shrink the forces Washington would rapidly deploy to Europe in a crisis—that is, in the event of a Russian attack on alliance territory.

At the same time, the Trump administration has sought to reassure allies that its commitment to Europe's defense remains undiminished, pledging to sustain the nuclear umbrella over NATO. This seemingly tidy solution to burden sharing—fewer boots on the ground, an ultimate backstop—may appeal to some American voters, but it is strategically dangerous, eroding the foundations of the deterrence that has protected the transatlantic alliance for decades.

Rather than reinforcing stability in Europe, the Trump administration's approach invites Russia to test NATO's escalation dominance—that is, the ability to impose unacceptable costs or failure on the adversary at every step on the escalation ladder, forcing it to back down rather than escalate. Drawing down U.S. forces reduces that dominance and weakens deterrence against Russian aggression in Europe. Over time, a cycle of escalation could leave an American president with an unenviable choice: back down or risk nuclear conflict.

The key to deterring Moscow lies not at the top of the escalation ladder, where nuclear weapons are in play, but on its lower rungs, where conventional weapons are what matters. The goal should be to deter Russian President Vladimir Putin from ordering any move against NATO. By the time Russia has seized limited territory on the alliance's eastern flank and dared Washington to risk nuclear war to reverse its gains, the United States will be left with only the worst options.

To prevent such a scenario, Washington must maintain the forces in Europe that only the United States can provide and that Moscow fears most: long-range precision strike capabilities from air, land, and sea. And it must signal to Moscow that the United States would not stand aside in the initial phase of a Russian attack, waiting to see whether Europe's conventional forces can repel the attack on their own. The Trump administration is right to press European allies to spend more on defense, but it cannot stop there. Doing so would hand Russia the escalation dominance it has long sought and bring the United States to the brink of nuclear war.

WHAT MOSCOW FEARS MOST

Over the past two decades, the Kremlin has come to fear the ability of the United States to sustain conventional military operations over not just months but years. Putin watched the United States strike Serbia in 1999 to pressure its leadership into halting military operations against Kosovo. He saw U.S. forces overthrow the Taliban and hunt down al-Qaeda operatives in Afghanistan. And he looked on as the United States invaded Iraq, destroyed one of the largest militaries in the Middle East, toppled the regime, and then sustained operations there for over a decade. Americans recall these campaigns and see failures and forever wars. But those same

campaigns look different from Moscow. The Russian leadership may smile at the costs the United States has borne, but it fears the astonishing dominance that the United States has achieved in conflicts across the globe.

The challenge Moscow faces in any confrontation with NATO does not center merely on the alliance's conventional forces along its eastern flank. The true obstacle to any designs the Kremlin might harbor is the United States' global reach—its ability to strike deep within Russian territory against logistics, transport, operations, and leadership to thwart any move against NATO. This is what Moscow saw in Serbia, Afghanistan, and Iraq.

Moscow's predicament is compounded by the United States' demonstrated ability to sustain advanced multidomain military operations via air, land, and sea—all supported by extensive global communications and intelligence, over months and years, while supplying its allies and partners for a long fight, as well. After Russia's seizure of Crimea in 2014, Western analysts debated whether the Kremlin might attempt a repeat in the Baltics: manufacture protests among ethnic Russians in one or more of those NATO member countries and then move rapidly to defend them by seizing territory. But the Russian military knew then that U.S. global military reach and logistics would likely doom any such gambit.

Today, Russia remains deterred in the face of U.S. escalation dominance. As long as the United States maintains a formidable presence in Europe, Moscow will not attempt against a NATO country what it tried against Ukraine in 2022: ground, air, and sea attacks to seize airports, roads, ports, and command centers. But if Washington retrenches from the continent, Moscow's calculations will shift.

Russia's most advanced forces—its airpower, multi-platform naval strike missiles, and ground-based cruise, ballistic, and hypersonic missiles—have not been fully deployed against Ukraine but remain reserved for a potential confrontation with NATO. Those forces will sit idle as long as the United States maintains its dominance in long-range precision strike capabilities and its ability to ship reinforcements and materiel across the Atlantic and forward to the fight. From 2022 to 2025, U.S. weapons helped Ukraine defend itself against Russia's invasion—and the United States was only a supplier, not a combatant. In defense of the alliance and the American homeland, the United States would be far more formidable; Russia would face more soldiers, more equipment, and overwhelming resupply.

INVITING AGGRESSION

The United States cannot leave the conventional rungs of the escalation ladder to Europeans, standing aside and merely promising to exercise nuclear options if all else fails. Even as European countries field significant conventional forces, procuring F-35 fighter jets and long-range precision strike artillery, they lack the global reach and logistical staying power that the United States brings to NATO. Any temptation on the part of Moscow to strike the alliance and seize an advantage over its eastern members has, until now, been checked by the depth, scope, and persistence of U.S. forces.

To grasp how seriously the Kremlin takes the problem of U.S. escalation dominance, it is important to understand how Russian military doctrine has evolved. In 2020, Moscow announced that it would permit the limited use of nuclear weapons when an enemy's conventional attack "threatens the very existence of the state." Many analysts dismissed this as an unlikely scenario in a conventional war with NATO and therefore failed to take it as seriously as they should have. In fact, the change in policy reflected Moscow's assessment that the United States would use precision long-range conventional strikes early in a conflict to eliminate the Russian leadership and destroy the strategic assets needed for a second strike. Moscow's threat of limited nuclear use—climbing the escalation ladder—was a public bid to establish escalation dominance. The Kremlin understood that Washington could mount a sustained conventional campaign, using unmatched advanced strike capabilities on a vast scale, against Russian command, control, and deep military assets. No lightning strike-and-grab operation on NATO's eastern flank could succeed against that.

But Moscow's confidence is rising. Canceling the combat teams to Poland and Romania eliminates the persistent rotational presence and joint allied training in the territories that Moscow would attempt to seize and hold, not only reducing the geographical depth of U.S. military presence but very clearly signaling a hands-off approach to forward defense that creates a break in the escalation dominance ladder. And when the Trump administration canceled the long-range precision strike battalion to Germany, it granted Russia strategic depth for supply, reinforcement, and command operations behind the frontlines.

By pulling the unit and signaling that the United States will commit less to reinforce the alliance in a crisis, the Trump administration has effectively delegated conventional defense to Europe, weakening the elements of deterrence Moscow fears most. Now, Russia could be tempted to seize territory in the Baltics or Poland through

its client state Belarus and dare NATO to escalate, knowing that its doctrine permits limited nuclear strikes against even conventional forces that threaten newly held territory. The result is a higher risk of nuclear confrontation.

Should Moscow seek to exploit the drawdown of U.S. forces in Europe and encroach on NATO territory, Washington may have to decide whether to threaten nuclear use to compel Russia to retreat. Given Russia's extensive nuclear arsenal and long-standing doctrine to answer U.S. nuclear use with strikes against the U.S. homeland, a collapse of conventional deterrence in Europe is not certain to end there.

CREDIBILITY ALL THE WAY DOWN

Early in the Cold War, once the Soviet Union had deployed strategic bombers and intercontinental ballistic missiles, U.S. policymakers wrestled with a difficult question: to deter an attack on Europe, should Washington threaten Russia with nuclear war and risk a strike on the American homeland? The answer was to strengthen credibility all along the escalation ladder. Washington invested in strong multidomain conventional capabilities and deployed nuclear-armed fighter aircraft to NATO air bases in Europe. The integration of U.S. conventional and nuclear commitments to the alliance was central to escalation dominance, credible deterrence, and ultimately the Cold War's peaceful end.

The conventional and nuclear capabilities of both the United States and Russia have changed dramatically since the Cold War, but the fundamental logic of credible deterrence and escalation dominance in Europe remains. To convince Moscow that an attack on NATO cannot succeed, Washington must continue to provide what Russia fears most: long-range precision strike capabilities, rapid reinforcement by advanced conventional forces, and the air and naval logistics needed to fight over months or years.

The United States' European allies have awakened to the need to spend more on defense. They are putting more advanced weapons systems into production, and at the 2025 NATO summit they agreed to spend a minimum of five percent of GDP on defense. But unless the United States remains central to thwarting Russia's war plans from the opening hours of any attack, Moscow will see the weaknesses in NATO's escalation ladder and may be tempted to exploit them, asserting its own escalation dominance and daring Washington to test it.

Moscow will be deterred only by an integrated strategy that promises Russian failure. If Washington signals an unwillingness to engage in conventional military action to defend Europe, Putin will conclude that Russia has escalation dominance on the continent and may climb the conventional rungs. That would leave the American president with a stark choice: concede Russian gains or leap to the nuclear rung. The United States would then face a historic strategic dilemma of its own making.


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About the ICBM EAR

Peter Huessy's ICBM EAR Report was originally prepared for the USAF in 1981 to help inform US nuclear deterrent policy professionals at the height of the Cold War. Eventually it was provided only to key elements of the Nuclear related Aerospace Industry. The objective: help build an informed political community on nuclear deterrent issues, especially the deployment of the US nuclear deterrent, especially the MX (Peacekeeper) missile. The report covered developments in the nuclear arena on a weekly basis, including developments in Congress, key events, threat assessments, remarks of top US officials, international activity key to US security interests, nuclear budget and program element issues, and arms control and proliferation matters as well.

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