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**THE TWOFOLD MEANING OF BRINKMANSHIP: EXPLAINING STRATEGIC AMBIGUITY IN RUSSIA'S NUCLEAR POLICY**

Discussions and debates about whether or not the role of Russia's Non-Strategic Nuclear Weapons underpins a so-called "Escalation to De-Escalation" strategy culminated in the 2018 Nuclear Posture Review, which declared the need for deploying a new low-yield nuclear warhead for submarine-launched ballistic missiles in order to prevent Russia from escalating to the limited nuclear level and successfully terminate the conflict. While unofficial evidence barely suggests that Russia may exhort to its NSNWs in order to stave off the adversary in crisis situations, common Western discussions on Escalation to De-Escalation revolve around the alleged existence of an "offensive" Escalation to De-Escalation strategy. Thereby, Moscow would pre-emptively escalate to the limited nuclear level over NATO's Eastern flank in order to take over it while leaving Western countries without no escalation options, given the doubts surrounding the ability of B61s' delivery systems at going beyond Russian air-defence. However, while Western countries are often busy with self-deterrence, thus perceiving immediate threats at each deployment by the adversary, they tend to overlook strategic manipulation of deployed capabilities. That is why analysis of ambiguity surrounding Russian NSNWs have been less popular in Western contexts. Based upon critical analysis of Escalation to De-Escalation and classic deterrence and escalation studies, this paper argues that ambiguity surrounding Russia's NSNWs is part of a brinkmanship strategy, which inadvertently triggered destabilizing dynamics in US-Russia relations. The article proceeds as follows. First, an introduction sets the scene and the aim of the article, as well as the methodology, including the scope and background of facts. Second, the Escalation to De-escalation debate is broken down in the attempt of shedding light on the ambiguity it builds on. Third, it is argued that ambiguity surrounding NSNWs is strategically exploited according to Schelling's concept of brinkmanship, though exacerbating the risk of inadvertent escalation with Western countries. Finally, a conclusion wraps up the argument and indicates its implications.

**Key words:** Russia's Nuclear Policy, Escalation to De-escalation, Brinkmanship, Strategic Ambiguity, 2018 Nuclear Posture Review, Inadvertent Escalation, Miscalculation, Russia, USA, Non-Strategic Nuclear Weapons, Tactical Nuclear Weapons, Iskander.

## Introduction

Three years have passed since the 2018 Nuclear Posture Review (NPR) “officialised” growing concerns of Russian limited nuclear first use aimed to coerce the US and/or its allies “into terminating a conflict on terms favorable to Russia” (Office of the Secretary of Defense, 2018, p. 7). In particular, the document stated that the President must acquire “a range of limited and graduated options, including a variety of delivery systems and explosive yields”, in order to “correct any Russian misperceptions of advantage and credibly deter Russian nuclear or non-nuclear strategic attacks” (Office of the Secretary of Defense, 2018, p. 31). While common debates on the 2018 NPR are often circumscribed to identify whether or not former Trump Administration got Russia’s nuclear policy right, I would like to shed some light on why such adverse dynamics occurred.

*The aim of this research* is to emphasize the strategic nature of ambiguity surrounding Russia’s NSNWs and dual-capable systems, as well as to explain the destabilizing driver that led the US to deploy the W76–2 warhead.

**The methodology of this research** consisted of critically reviewing the “Escalation to De-Escalation” (ETD) debate in an attempt to shed light on strategic ambiguity. In particular, I confronted contrasting interpretations of Russia’s nuclear policy with respect to ETD, also relying on both Russian and US declaratory policies, and found that there is no right answer when it comes to the existence of an ETD strategy in Russia’s military planning. In fact, Russia’s NSNWs and dual-capable systems (9K720) are enclosed by a veil of ambiguity hindering correct evaluations of NSNWs’ role in Russia’s nuclear posture. In other words, both ETD arguments and counterarguments are nothing but speculations by definition, as they build on from uncertainty surrounding the subject matter. Subsequently, through the reliance on classic deterrence theories and escalation studies, I introduced the correlation between Russia’s ambiguity and the Shelling’s concept of brinkmanship, as well as the inadvertent driver that impelled the US to deploy a new warhead in a bid to fill the deterrence gap.

*Scope: limited to declassified information and public sources.* This research involved declassified information and public sources. I relied on primary (official policy documents) and secondary (relevant journal articles, books, online articles) sources, as well as public analysis of some primary sources.

*Background.* There are considerable variations in how great powers generally conceive the role of their nuclear weapons in the international system and, accordingly, how they implement these weapons in their policy doctrines. The US-Russia “nuclear discrepancies” are emblematic and can be arguably placed among the most representative ones.

On the one hand, the weakness of Russian conventional forces has impelled defence analysts to stress the importance of nuclear weapons for both nuclear and conventional deterrence purposes (Zagorski, 2011, p. 404). According to a recent report on US and Russian NSNWs, Russia no longer had the means to maintain an effective conventional army after the dissolution of the Soviet Union and the economic disorders of the 1990s (Woolf, 2020, p. 24). This

problem is particularly clear when one takes a look at the gaps in Russian conventional forces emerged during the Russo-Georgian war in 2008. Despite the Russian victory over the Georgian troops, the conflict revealed a poor performance in the air power, problems with command and control, a poor intelligence apparatus and considerable gaps in capabilities, such as a shortage of precision guided weapons (Kofman, 2018). Consequently, such a conventional weakness, coupled with the threat of NATO expansion, has been raising concerns about Russia's increasing reliance on nuclear weapons as weapons of first choice in crisis situations (Woolf, 2020, p. 24; Cimbala, 2000, p. 132).

On the other hand, US nuclear weapons have followed a different path. The 2010 Nuclear Posture Review emphasized the importance of improving conventional forces, reducing the reliance on nuclear weapons (Zagorski, 2011, p. 403). Besides, it is worth noting that Western leaders have been often restrained from using nuclear weapons by the so-called "nuclear taboo" (Kroenig, 2018a, p. 9). The Obama years were indeed representative of such "peaceful inhibition," as the Democratic President called for a "world without nuclear weapons" (Kroenig, 2018a, p. 9). This clearly suggests how diverse US and Russian views of the subject matter are.

With that being said, the variations between the United States and Russia with respect to the policy role of nuclear weapons have contributed to the rising of anxieties among Western analysts emphasizing the dangerousness of Russian Non-Strategic Nuclear Weapons systems. According to many renowned US political scientists, the key problem with the US-Russia relationship hinges on the disparity in tactical nuclear capabilities (Kroenig, 2018b; Colby, 2015; Schneider, 2017). As a matter of fact, Russia's nuclear arsenal is particularly flexible, as it is characterized by a wide range of yields and means of delivery (Kroenig, 2018a, p. 7). In contrast, the US and NATO nuclear arsenals comprise just a few B61 gravity-bombs, whose delivery-systems efficiency at going beyond Russia's sophisticated air defence is also a debated issue (Kroenig, 2018a, p. 10; Raina, 2020). These circumstances, coupled with the threatening behaviour demonstrated with the seizure of Crimea and the incursions into Ukraine, led many Western scholars to think that Russia's nuclear policy is highly likely to be one of so-called "Escalation To De-Escalation," thereby Moscow would escalate to the limited nuclear level by employing its large number of low-yield nuclear weapons in the first place against some NATO countries in Eastern Europe<sup>1</sup>, forcing the West into backing down given the absence of credible deterrence options (Kroenig, 2018a, p. 5; Colby, 2015; Schneider, 2017; Trenin, 2019, p. 16).

### **Deconstructing the Escalation to De-Escalation debate**

*The dangerousness of ETD makes its implementation unlikely.* In the bipolar order of the Cold War, both the United States and the Soviet Union acknowledged the dangers posed by the risk of nuclear escalation, as any overt

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<sup>1</sup> Russia is supposed to attack the territories of its historical "near abroad", such as the Baltic states, Poland, and Romania (Colby, 2015).

clash of arms between the two was highly likely to escalate rapidly to all-out nuclear exchanges (Kartchner and Gerson, 2014, p. 159). As a result, a common approach based on shared principles of crisis management was deemed essential and channels for exchanges of information and communication, as well as institutionalized mechanisms for regular consultation were created (Kartchner and Gerson, 2014, p. 160). By contrast, the asymmetries of the today's multipolar world order have obfuscated escalation control (Kartchner and Gerson, 2014, p. 162–165; Morgan *et al*, 2008, p. 38). The diplomatic “back channels” that played a fundamental role in handling the Cuban Missile Crisis may be weak or even inexistent (Kartchner and Gerson, 2014, pp. 165). Consequently, nowadays it is a highly risky strategy one that aims at winning a war by escalating to the limited nuclear level with the hope that the conflict will de-escalate immediately after. Russia cannot be certain that the US and its NATO allies would surrender in case of limited nuclear escalation. In fact, the 2018 NPR states that “it remains the policy of the United States to retain some ambiguity regarding the precise circumstances that might lead to a U. S. nuclear response” (Office of the Secretary of Defense, 2018, p. 22). In this vein, ETD seems an irrational policy option, as there is no assurance of the hoped outcome and the consequences in case of failure would be dramatic. In short, the problem with the ETD argument consists in the absence of any evidence explaining why Russia would be willing to run the risk of facing mutual destruction through the Putin's perspective. American Professor Matthew Kroenig (2018a, p. 9) suggests that US policymakers are constrained by a nuclear taboo that makes nuclear war unthinkable in the eyes of Western countries. However, it is a matter of fact that the nuclear taboo has been undergoing several pressures because of renewed power rivalries or bellicose rhetoric (Tannenwald, 2018, p. 103). This trend is remarkably exemplified by former US President Trump's threat “to rain fire and fury like the world has never seen” against the North Korean leader Kim Jong Un (Tannenwald, 2018, p. 90). What is more, many Western political scientists believe that the ETD policy would be carried out in the form of a pre-emptive strategy to anticipate a major conventional battle (Kroenig, 2018a, p. 7). However, here is a relevant statement by Russian President Vladimir Putin with the Italian newspaper “Corriere della Sera”

As for some countries' concerns about Russia's possible aggressive actions, I think that only an insane person and only in a dream can imagine that Russia would suddenly attack NATO. I think some countries are simply taking advantage of people's fears with regard to Russia. They just want to play the role of front-line countries that should receive some supplementary military, economic, financial or some other aid. Therefore, it is pointless to support this idea; it is absolutely groundless. But some may be interested in fostering such fears. I can only make a conjecture (Corriere della Sera, 2015).

Therefore, I would argue that Russia's nuclear arsenal is actually intended to defend the country against enemy aggression, rather than for attacking in the first place (Woolf, 2020, p. 23). Indeed, the Kremlin recently released a document entitled “Basic Principles of State Policy of the Russian Federation

on Nuclear Deterrence,” which, according to the Vienna Center for Disarmament and Non-Proliferation, “makes clear that nuclear weapons are reserved exclusively for a scenario when Russia is attacked” (The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, 2020; Sokov, 2020).

*Drivers for believing in ETD.* Despite the risks that makes an ETD implementation unlikely, it must be said that Western fears are not completely unfounded. In particular, Basic Principles does not clarify whether or not Russia has an ETD doctrine and it is vague when it comes to the exact threshold that would lead to the use of nuclear weapons by Russia (Bidgood, 2020; Oliker, 2020; Sokov, 2020; Bugos, 2020). Besides, Russia’s frequent “nuclear saber-rattling” (harsh rhetoric and military exercises apparently aimed at reminding the relevance of Russia’s capabilities) has been exacerbating concerns of Russia’s willingness to challenge Eastern Europe (Woolf, 2020, p. 32).

*Contrasting interpretations of Russia’s military posture.* When doubts surround the credibility of a given state’s declaratory policies, it is also necessary to rely on other sources to infer its intentions and strategies, such as the size and posture of its capabilities (Mahnken and Evans, 2019, p. 60). Military exercises, in particular, are indicators of what a country actually wants its military forces to be capable of doing and, accordingly, they could turn out useful when trying to get the picture of Russia’s nuclear posture (Oliker, 2016, p. 5; Tertrais, 2018, p. 39). The use of nuclear weapons during Zapad-99 is acknowledged. As a matter of fact, former Russian Defence Minister Igor Sergeev stated that “the decision to use nuclear weapons was made” after conventional defences “proved ineffective [and the] enemy continued to push into Russia.” (Bleek, 2001). However, Zapad-99 seems to be an isolated case. According to French political scientist Bruno Tertrais (2018, p. 39), “no known theatre military exercise has included nuclear-weapons use for a decade.” In fact, Oliker and Baklitskiy (2018) inform that Zapad-2017 “did not have any evident nuclear strike component, despite positing a conflict with the NATO alliance”. Similarly, relevant research on Zapad-2013 by The Jamestown Foundation found that “contrary to Zapad 2009, the limited use of nuclear weapons was not simulated during Zapad 2013” (Zdanavicius and Czekaj, 2015, p. 6). In contrast, Zapad-2009 is often thought to have included a nuclear strike against Poland (Oliker, 2016, p. 7). However, Tertrais (2018, p. 39) explains that “this claim comes from a single source, a report by the Polish magazine Wprost”. In short, one can argue that military exercises do not provide any relevant evidence to support an alleged ETD policy. Accordingly, Oliker and Baklitskiy (2018) refer to this possibility as “a nonexistent problem.”

On the other hand, Oliker and Baklitskiy might also be wrong. As a matter of fact, a 2003 paper by the Russian Ministry of Defence (2003, quoted in Mahnken and Evans, 2019, p. 62) entitled “Important Tasks of the Development of the Armed Forces”, albeit unofficial, points out a need for “forcing the adversary to cease hostilities by threatening or actually delivering strikes of various sizes with use of conventional and/or nuclear weapons”. Furthermore, two interesting research works by Frank R. Kirbyson and Jo

han Norberg revealed a factor that might hidden a possible nuclear strategy in some of the exercises after Zapad-2009. In particular, Kirbyson (2019, p. 62) does acknowledge that there is little evidence highlighting escalation dynamics in many exercises. However, Norberg (2018, p. 61–62) observed that Russia's Northern Fleet, which is a fundamental leg of Russia's second-strike capability, was deployed in a separated exercise right after Kavkaz-2012. Accordingly, this event suggests that Russia already crossed the nuclear threshold in the official exercise and the Northern Fleet would serve to deter strategic nuclear strikes coming from the West (Kirbyson, 2019, p. 55; Norberg, 2018, p. 62). In addition, this would clarify the discrimination problem about whether dual-capable missiles, particularly SS-26 Iskander-M deployed in Kaliningrad, are armed with conventional or tactical nuclear warheads (Stubbs, 2018). In particular, Kirbyson (2019, p. 55) points out that it is not officially known whether or not the Iskander launched during Kavkaz-2012 was nuclear tipped. Yet, according to the Kirbyson's speculation, that Iskander must be nuclear tipped, otherwise the deployment of the Northern Fleet would be unjustified (Kirbyson, 2019, p. 55). Importantly, Kirbyson (2019, p. 55) noticed that similar situations occurred with Zapad-2013, Vostok-2014, Tsentr-2015, Kavkaz-2016, and Zapad-2017. This would demonstrate that the majority of exercises involved the use of NSNWs and, therefore, the West would be right in being concerned with Iskander-M missiles delivering nuclear payloads.

*Clear pattern of ambiguity surrounding Russia's NSNWs.* The main problem with the Kirbyson's and Norberg's arguments is their speculative nature. Indeed, even the title of Kirbyson's research points this out: "Escalate to De-Escalate: Speculation on Russian Nuclear Strategy". Actually, getting the picture of Russia's nuclear policy may not be that simple, as there is a lack of official evidence clearly outlining it and helping out countries to adopt appropriate policy doctrines in response. For example, Tertrais (2018, p. 36) clarifies that there is actually no official evidence of specific nuclear warheads designed for Iskander missiles. By the same token, there is no official evidence showing whether Russian military exercises are nuclear or conventional (Tertrais, 2018, p. 36). In like manner, uncertainty surrounds even the actual size of Russia's tactical nuclear capabilities. Indeed, a large number of speculations and hypotheses have been made but, according to McDermott (2011, p. 6), "The lack of official transparency concerning tactical nuclear weapons leads to estimates of numbers in the Russian inventory varying from 2,000 to 6,000" (Woolf, 2020, pp. 26–28). In short, the lack of transparency and concerns due to the frequent nuclear saber-rattling have pushed scholars to conjecture and theorize about the real Russian intentions and, consequently, make speculations about whether or not Russia's nuclear policy is one of escalation to de-escalation. Some say it is, whereas others say it is not. Only one thing is certain in the words of Mahnken and Evans (2019, p. 63), namely that "Russia's contemporary nuclear strategy, particularly with respect to its nonstrategic forces, is ambiguous".

### **Building upon Ambiguity**

*Limitedness of US strategic thinking.* According to David Koplow (2009, p. 39), it is a shared consideration that American policy tends to be extremely casualty-averse and restrained about exposing its military forces to mortal threats. That is probably why “Western military circles are busy with self-deterrence” (Veebel, 2019, p. 190). Accordingly, it is unsurprising that US ETD advocates do not provide any relevant reason why Russia would be willing to face mutual destruction with the West. Actually, US scholars probably do not even care about Russian motives. But they do care about US national security. Therefore, it is plausible that Russian nuclear saber-rattling and ambiguity surrounding NSNWs and dual-capable systems have made the West uncomfortable and have raised concerns about just the possibility of Russia employing an ETD strategy against NATO, lack of official evidence notwithstanding (Tertrais, 2018, p. 41; Woolf, 2020, p. 32). This arguably impedes the West from focusing on the broader picture. In particular, Oliker (2016, p. 10) noticed that the Russians had never explicitly discussed a nuclear role for Iskanders until 2008, when Western media first stated that nuclear warheads could be installed on them. After 2008, Russian officials have sometimes referred to a possible tactical nuclear deployment in Kaliningrad (Oliker, 2016, pp. 10–11). That means that Russia’s ambiguity is actually intentional and deliberate (Tertrais, 2018, p. 41).

*The use of brinkmanship to gain geopolitical advantage.* Conceiving Russian emphasis on Iskanders as “strategic manipulation” of a weapons system provides a new understanding of saber-rattling. In particular, the majority of Zapad exercises have been conducted right after NATO initiatives. For example, Zapad2013 was probably a response to Baltic Host 2013 and Steadfast Jazz 2013 (Veebel, 2019, 186). On the one hand, these actions are clearly threatening for Western countries, which would tend to assume that Russia is willing to challenge Eastern Europe, possibly by adopting an ETD policy (Office of the Secretary of Defense, 2018, p. 30; Woolf, 2020, p. 32; Oliker and Baklitskiy, 2018). On the other hand, Dr. ViljarVeebel (2019, p. 183–185) interestingly thinks that every initiative taking place in Russia’s nearby regions can be intentionally responded to by “doubling or tripling counteractions, with the hope that the Western countries will lose their nerve first, then propose negotiations and open the bargaining process”. As such, this approach would provide Russia with intrastate popularity and international reputation, as it would mean convincing the US and NATO to retreat and concede Russia a significant berth on the European continent (Mahnken and Evans, 2019, p. 63; Veebel, 2019, p. 183). Hence, if one thinks that Russia’s idea of nuclear deterrence hinges on the work of Thomas Schelling since the 1990s and it has not changed since then, we can also argue that Russia’s nuclear posture is consistent with the Shelling’s concept of brinkmanship, namely

the tactic of deliberately letting the situation get somewhat out of hand, just because its being out of hand may be intolerable to the other party and force his accommodation. It means intimidating an adversary and exposing him to a shared risk, or deterring him by showing that if he makes a contrary

move he may disturb us so that we slip over the brink whether we want to or not, carrying him with us. (Schelling, 1960, p. 200; Sokov, 2020).

Strategic ambiguity lies at the core of brinkmanship. According to Professor Barry Nalebuff (1986, p. 20), the maintenance of a country's firm position when it faces the risk of conflict is fundamental and it must keep it until either the adversary concedes defeat or the conflict escalates into war. Accordingly, Russia is undoubtedly able to play its part in the game, as its limited economic resources make that of Russia a "highly concentrated security and defense policy, in which hesitation, morality, and questionable efficiency have no place" (Veebel, 2019, p. 184). The United States' firmness, in contrast, is undermined by Russia's ambiguity surrounding NSNWs. According to Manhken and Evans (2019, p. 63), ambiguity impedes the US from taking effective steps to deter or prevent the adversary's NSNWs and it fuels debates over what kind of action to adopt in order not to be interpreted as an overreaction to an unspecified nuclear threat. In practice, this action takes place when Russia puts an emphasis on Iskanders, whose uncertain nature makes the West nervous and keeps it off-balance (Oliker and Baklitskiy, 2018). In theory, we could argue that the superior risk of escalation that goes along with a more belligerent posture may restrain the US from reacting, thus diminishing the chance of war (Nalebuff, 1986, p. 22). In other words, Russia is highly likely to be exploiting ambiguity and the consequent risk of escalation in order to deter the US and gain geopolitical advantage.

*Brinkmanship and miscalculation in the US-Russia scenario.* Even if the prospects of the game are deemed as much dangerous as to force a side to back down, inadvertent or irrational actions beyond the control of countries' leaders could nevertheless provide a path to escalation before any concession is provided (Nalebuff, 1986, p. 21). In other words, emphasis on dual-capable missiles and their uncertain nature clearly exacerbates the risk of inadvertent escalation. In particular, Professor Barry Posen (1992, p. 12) analysed what conditions might affect the risk of inadvertent escalation, finding that when states perceive a growth in other states' offensive capabilities, the former tends to be worried and, consequently, "initiate compensating political or military activity". One example is represented by the often-vague nature of military capabilities, which causes states to "stumble into spirals of mutual hostility and competitive military preparations" (Posen, 1992, p. 13). Accordingly, the fact that the West gets nervous when Russia stresses its Iskanders is clearly alarming. Warheads installed on them might or might not be nuclear and they might or might not be used as de-escalatory means in a crisis environment. This discrimination problem is, to put it more simply, strictly related to the US interpretation of these missiles. Besides, Posen (1992, p. 14) notices that geography can contribute to discrimination problems regarding the offensive or defensive nature of certain capabilities. Indeed, it is true that the last document on nuclear deterrence released by the Kremlin makes clear that nuclear weapons are reserved for defensive purposes only (Sokov, 2020). However, the deployment of an Iskander in Kaliningrad is clearly threatening for NATO, as this area is exploitable to block the access to the Baltic Sea,

thus isolating Lithuania, Estonia and Latvia (Stubbs, 2018; Veebel, 2019, p. 185). NATO would need to pass through the Kaliningrad corridor, which is a

110- to 150-km-wide stretch of territory between the Russian enclave and Belarus that could be subject to long-range artillery and flank attacks from both sides and would require a commitment of NATO forces to secure (Shlapak and Johnson, 2016, p. 4).

Therefore, the US may also think that Iskanders are nuclear tipped and have been deployed in Kaliningrad in order to be employed in the form of tactical de-escalatory nuclear instruments over the Baltic States. Consequently, the US would “initiate compensating political or military activity” by deploying, for instance, new low-yield nuclear options to fill the deterrence gap (Posen, 1992, p. 12). However, if the US were wrong, this would certainly be an “overreaction to an unspecified nuclear threat” that would ignite the risk of inadvertent escalation (Manhken and Evans, 2019, p. 63). The problem is that the US government has to take a decision to maintain its firmness in the brinkmanship game (Nalebuff, 1986, p. 21). As such, the decision is often the result of an imperfect process, especially in the US-Russia context, where the decision-making process on the US side builds on from ambiguity (Schelling, 1960, p. 201). What follows is that the US and Russia can get into a major war inadvertently because of US miscalculation regarding the precise role of Russia’s NSNWs and dual-capable systems. “While ambiguity brings some deterrence benefits, it also feeds the risk of miscalculation” (Gower, 2018).

### **Conclusions**

Based upon analysis of the Escalation to De-Escalation debate and classic Shelling’s deterrence theories, I conclude that the role of Russia’s Non-Strategic Nuclear Weapons is consistent with a deterrence strategy based on brinkmanship and strategic ambiguity. As such, while this move is supposed to keep the West off-balance in Russia’s thinking, it actually triggered an inadvertent escalatory dynamic in the US/NATO-Russia context. Thereby, ambiguity caused the US to misinterpret the role of Russia’s NSNWs and dual-capable systems as means of an offensive Escalation to De-Escalation policy aimed to coerce the US and/or its allies “into terminating a conflict on terms favorable to Russia” (Office of the Secretary of Defense, 2018, p. 7).

Through “nuclear saber-rattling” and strategic ambiguity surrounding NSNWs, Russia takes advantage of the disparity in tactical nuclear capabilities with Western countries in a bid to enhance deterrence by increasing fears of mutual and extreme escalation, not just limited escalation. However, Russia’s strategic behaviour raised alarms among Western countries, especially in Washington, which deployed a new low-yield nuclear warhead (W76-2) for Trident D5 SLBMs in order to “correct any Russian misperceptions of advantage and credibly deter Russian nuclear or non-nuclear strategic attacks” (Office of the Secretary of Defense, 2018, p. 31).

This US move, in turn, raises further questions. What are the implications of W76-2 with respect to US-Russia relations? Is the attempt to deter Russia by trying to match its Non-Strategic Nuclear capabilities an appropriate tactic?

Although these questions go beyond the aim of this research, I can anticipate that my responses are far from positive. First of all, the act of deterring a country by matching its capabilities stems from the classic concepts of escalation ladder and escalation dominance, which is the “ability to escalate a conflict in ways that will be disadvantageous or costly to the adversary while the adversary cannot do the same in return” by dominating a given region of the ladder (Kahn, 1965, p. 290; Morgan et al, 2008, p. 15). However, Cold-War escalation tactics are questionable nowadays and their adoption in policy doctrines may not be appropriate in light of the asymmetries of the post-Cold War World Order (Fitzsimmons, 2017).

Furthermore, the improved flexibility of the US arsenal has had a detrimental impact on Russia’s national security. According to Russian foreign ministry spokeswoman Maria Zakharova

Those who like to theorize about the flexibility of American nuclear potential must understand that in line with the Russian military doctrine such actions are seen as warranting retaliatory use of nuclear weapons by Russia (VOA news, 2020).

What is more, deploying a low-yield nuclear option exclusively designed for Trident D5s introduces a discrimination problem on the Russian side. In fact, these missiles are designed to deliver thermonuclear options apart from the new low-yield warhead (Narang, 2018). Consequently, Russia would not be able to distinguish a tactical nuclear launch from a strategic one, thus exacerbating so-called “use-or-lose” dilemmas in case of a counterforce attack and plausibly leading Russia to rely on a launch-on-warning posture in response to whatever kind of aggression involving an SLBM, “regardless of its weapon specifications” (Narang, 2018; VOA news, 2020).

Escalation dominance and low-yield warhead aside, it is clear that strategic ambiguity surrounding Russia’s NSNWs inadvertently caused the US to take a further destabilizing move, apparently trapping the two countries in perilous dynamics of instability. Hopefully, the extension of the New START treaty seems to suggest that Washington, under the lead of President Biden, is trying to crack down on hostilities and restoring, to some extent, the arms control architecture with Russia. But given the short period of time since the new Administration took office, there is still no clear telling what we can expect.

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## **ДВОЯКЕ ЗНАЧЕННЯ ШВИДКОСТІ: ПОЯСНЕННЯ СТРАТЕГІЧНОЇ НЕОДНОЗНАЧНОСТІ В ЯДЕРНІЙ ПОЛІТИЦІ РОСІЇ**

### **Резюме**

Обговорення та дебати про те, чи підкріплює роль нестратегічної ядерної зброї Росії так звану стратегію «ескалації до деескалації», завершилися в Огляді ядерної стратегії 2018 року, в якому була оголошена необхідність розгортання нової ядерної боеголовки малої потужності для балістичних ракет підводних човнів, щоб запобігти ескалації Росії до обмеженого ядерного рівня й успішно покласти край конфлікту. У той час як неофіційні свідчення дозволяють припустити, що Росія може підтримувати свої НСЯО, щоб відобразити противника в кризових ситуаціях, звичайні західні дискусії з ескалації до деескалації обертаються навколо передбачуваного існування «наступальної» стратегії ескалації до деескалації. Так, Москва випрежджуюче перейде на обмежений ядерний рівень на східному фланзі НАТО, щоб взяти його під контроль, залишивши західні країни без можливості ескалації,

враховуючи сумніви, пов'язані зі здатністю систем доставки В61 виходити за рамки російської протиповітряної оборони. Однак, хоча західні країни зайняті самостриманням, сприймаючи погрози при кожному розгортанні противником, вони, як правило, не звертають уваги на стратегічне маніпулювання розгорнутими можливостями. Ось чому аналіз неоднозначності російських НЯО менш популярний в західних контекстах. Грунтуючись на критичному аналізі ескалації до деескалації та дослідженнях стримування і ескалації, в статті стверджуємо, що двозначність щодо НЯО Росії є частиною стратегії балансування, яка ненавмисне спровокувала дестабілізуючу динаміку у відносинах між США і Росією. Стаття будується наступним чином. Вступ встановлює мету статті і методологію, включаючи передісторію фактів. Далі дебати про перехід до деескалації піддані критиці в спробі пролити світло на двозначність, на якій вони будуються. Потім стверджується, що двозначність, пов'язана з НСЯО, стратегічно використовується відповідно до концепції балансування на межі Шеллінга, хоча і збільшує ризик ненавмисної ескалації конфлікту з західними країнами. Нарешті висновок завершує аргументацію і вказує на наслідки.

**Ключові слова:** російська ядерна політика, ескалація до деескалації, балансування на межі війни, стратегічна двозначність, Огляд ядерної стратегії 2018, ненавмисна ескалація, прорахунок, Росія, США, нестратегічна ядерна зброя, тактична ядерна зброя, Іскандер

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## **ДВОЙКОЕ ЗНАЧЕНИЕ СКОРОСТИ: ОБЪЯСНЕНИЕ СТРАТЕГИЧЕСКОЙ НЕОДНОЗНАЧНОСТИ В ЯДЕРНОЙ ПОЛИТИКЕ РОССИИ**

### **Резюме**

Обсуждения и дебаты о том, подкрепляет ли роль нестратегического ядерного оружия России так называемую стратегию «эскалации к деэскалации», завершились в Обзоре ядерной стратегии 2018 года, в котором была объявлена необходимость развертывания новой ядерной боеголовки малой мощности для баллистических ракет подводных лодок, чтобы предотвратить эскалацию России до ограниченного ядерного уровня и успешно положить конец конфликту. В то время как неофициальные свидетельства едва ли позволяют предположить, что Россия может поддерживать свои НСЯО, чтобы отразить противника в кризисных ситуациях, обычные западные дискуссии по эскалации к деэскалации вращаются вокруг предполагаемого существования «наступательной» стратегии эскалации к деэскалации. Так, Москва упреждающе перейдет на ограниченный ядерный уровень на восточном фланге НАТО, чтобы взять его под контроль, оставив западные страны без возможности эскалации, учитывая сомнения, связанные со способностью систем доставки В61 выходить за рамки российской противовоздушной обороны. Однако, хотя западные страны заняты самосдерживанием, воспринимая угрозы при каждом развертывании противником, они, как правило, не обращают внимания на стратегическое манипулирование развернутыми возможностями. Вот почему ана-

лиз неоднозначности российских НЯО менее популярен в западных контекстах. Основываясь на критическом анализе эскалации до деэскалации и исследованиях сдерживания и эскалации, в статье утверждаем, что двусмысленность в отношении НЯО России является частью стратегии балансирования, которая непреднамеренно спровоцировала дестабилизирующую динамику в отношениях между США и Россией. Статья строится следующим образом. Введение устанавливает цель статьи и методологию, включая предысторию фактов. Далее дебаты о переходе к деэскалации подвергнуты критике в попытке пролить свет на двусмысленность, на которой они строятся. Затем утверждается, что двусмысленность, связанная с НСЯО, стратегически используется в соответствии с концепцией балансирования на границе Шеллинга, хотя и увеличивает риск непреднамеренной эскалации конфликта с западными странами. Наконец вывод завершает аргументацию и указывает на последствия.

**Ключевые слова:** ядерная политика России, эскалация к деэскалации, балансирование на грани войны, стратегическая неопределенность, Обзор ядерной политики 2018, непреднамеренная эскалация, просчет, Россия, США, нестратегическое ядерное оружие, тактическое ядерное оружие, Искандер.