

Tactical Nuclear Fantasists

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Bogeyman politics tends to be flatly unimaginative. The image of the nuclear-mad Russian President, counting his diminishing options, has caught the imagination of press and propaganda outlets across the West. Will Mad Vlad go the distance and deploy a nuclear weapon in Ukraine?

Certainly, his rhetoric suggests the possibility. Vladimir Putin has [promised](#) to "make use of all weapon systems available to us" in the event Russia's territorial integrity is threatened. Moving Russian doctrine away from using nuclear weapons to defend the state's existence to defending "territorial integrity" suggests an expeditious revision. But let us not simply focus on the customary trope of the mad Russian who thirsts for violence. The tactical nuclear weapon has always lingered as a viable option for those who have it.

The moment the innocents of Hiroshima were incinerated in August 1945, a weapon of mass lethality became a political option, the means to extract concessions and terrify opponents. Even more disturbingly, it also created an incentive on the part of powers to prevent others from getting it, thereby creating an exclusive club equipped with special amenities and privileges.

During a number of teeth-chattering moments of the Cold War, the use of nuclear weapons was contemplated. Historians note Cuba, Berlin and the Middle East. That they were not actually unleashed was a matter of unalloyed dumb luck and faux theory. Over time, this spawned an accepted, if nonsensical literature about the merits of having such lethal means. Precisely because of their potency, such weapons would never be used. Possessing them would be, to use a modern comparison, much like having unconvertible digital currency of huge value, more a matter of impressing your rivals than drawing direct benefit from them.

Having said that, one category of nuclear weapon has continued to mark a grey area, lending a disturbed, even lunatic's legitimacy to the battlefield deployment of such

weapons. The tactical nuclear weapon is deceptively seductive to military planners. Being of lower yield than their strategic, all-killing counterparts, they are seen as, [in the words](#) of the Union of Concerned Scientists, “more militarily useful, and less politically objectionable, and thus more likely to be used.” This does little to dampen the awful reality that such weapons can have yields greater than that of the first atomic weapon ever used.

The nature of such weapons is disturbingly nebulous in the military argot. In 2018, James Mattis, as US Secretary of Defense, [opined](#) to the House Armed Services Committee that there was no “such thing as a ‘tactical nuclear weapon’”. Any nuclear weapon used at any time is a strategic game changer.”

Tactical nuclear weapons can comprise any number of devices with yields ranging from 1 kiloton to 50 kilotons. Alistair Millar, [writing](#) for *Arms Control Today*, mentions a few, including nuclear landmines, nuclear artillery shells, and missile warheads dropped by air or launched by missiles.

The [2018 US Nuclear Posture Review](#) does away with much of the sentiment of the 2010 NPR in stressing the need to improve capabilities against Russia in various areas, including nonstrategic nuclear options. Moscow is specifically blamed for embracing a “limited first use” policy involving low-yield weapons that might “provide coercive advantage in crises and at lower levels of conflict.”

Special attention is reserved for Washington’s own nonstrategic nuclear options, with low-yield warheads for submarine launched ballistic missiles and a new submarine launched cruise missile being suggested additions. As Moscow had heavily invested in such tactical weapons, NATO forces would be caught short with only strategic options at its disposal. “We do not believe Russia would be expanding their limited resources to modernize and expand their nonstrategic nuclear forces if they had little or no confidence in this strategy,” [asserted](#) deputy director for strategic stability, Greg Weaver, one of the authors of the 2018 NPR.

The military and security establishments of such powers has effectively legitimised the potential use of such weapons. During the Gulf War of 1991, then Secretary of Defense Dick Cheney chewed over the prospects of using tactical nuclear weapons against Iraqi forces. He went so far as to [commission a study](#) on how many would be needed to, in the words of then President George H.W. Bush, “take out an Iraqi Republican Guard division, if necessary.” The astonishing answer was 17.

During the administration of George W. Bush, tactical nuclear weapons became an object of serious interest. The ghoulish spectacle of civilian planes finding their targets against the Twin Towers in New York and the Pentagon in Washington did its fair share of unsettling. Cheney, for one, continued showing interest in using nonstrategic versions of such weapons in battle. According to Seymour Hersh, he [mulled over](#) using low-yield nuclear weapons such as the bunker-buster B61-11 against Iran’s underground nuclear sites, including the Natanz main centrifuge plant some two hundred miles south of Tehran.

Ambiguity when it comes to a prospective use of nuclear weapons is considered one of the great flaws of military and political planning. Each party should know what the other proposes to do in certain circumstances, be it in terms of command structure, control and communications. Who has the authority to launch what weapons and when? What are the

safeguards to cope with error? As far as Putin's threats go, NATO Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg holds to the [traditional view](#): the Russian leader "knows very well that a nuclear war should never be fought and can never be won."

Opacity is another factor complicating the whole business of how we cope with nonstrategic nuclear weapons. Numbers regarding the world's tactical nuclear stockpiles remain sketchy. "Greater transparency regarding the size of tactical nuclear stockpiles would be an important first step towards establishing international norms against their modernisation," [proposes](#) Brendan Thomas-Noone.

Paradoxically, even as such measures as the [Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons](#) gather greater popularity, the old members of the nuclear club continue to make mischief, modernising and adjusting their arsenals with little intention of ever abolishing them. The sheer allure of such weapons is unlikely to dissipate till their political dividends diminish. In the Ukraine War, such dividends abound.

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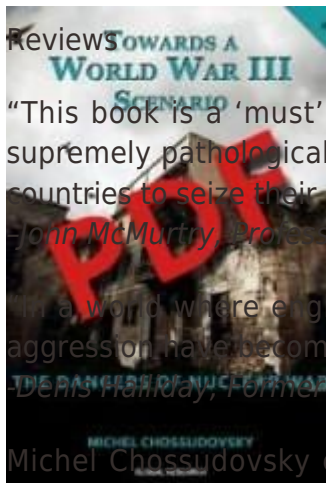
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