Russia’s Escalation Management and a Baltic Nuclear Weapon Free Zone

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Abstract: *This article examines the idea of a Baltic Nuclear-Weapon Free Zone (NWFZ) in the context of the Russian Federation's deterrence and escalation management theories, largely as enunciated by Russian military theorists. It first introduces the history of the Baltic NWFZ idea from the early 1960s to the present proposals, and then explores Russian escalation management. The author concludes by considering how Baltic NWFZ proposals may interact with—and be understood through—the Russian military's perspective.*

After the Russian Federation's invasion of Crimea in 2014, observers were not slow to identify the nuclear dimension of the confrontation. Some people feared that in the wrong circumstances the conflict might escalate not merely to violence but even to nuclear use. Consequently, there has been renewed discussion in some quarters of a Cold War-era idea: a Baltic nuclear- weapon free zone (NWFZ).[1] The basic suggestion is that if the two sides could agree on removing nuclear weapons, then a natural cap would constrain any hypothetical future escalation in the region. Current proposals differ in their details, including the relative evenhandedness of each side's removal of nuclear weapons. Besides the sometimes vague and sometimes geopolitically unequal terms proposed, such discussions are also notably ethnocentric in character. Proponents consistently imagine NWFZ talks to be

[1] See, for example, Barry Blechman, Alex Bollfrass, and Laicie Helley, "Reducing the Risk of Nuclear War in the Nordic/Baltic Region," Stimson Center Report (2015); Pierre Schori, "The fateful issue in Sweden's autumn election was nuclear weapons," *Open Democracy,* vol. 12, Jan. 2019, https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/can-europe-make-it/fateful-issue-in-sweden-s-autumn-election-was-nuclear-weapons/; and Pia Fuhrop, Ulrich Kühn, and Olivier Meier, "Creating an Opportunity to Withdraw U.S. Nuclear Weapons from Europe," *Arms Control Today,* Oct. 2020, https://www.armscontrol.org/act/2020-10/features/creating-opportunity-withdraw-us-nuclear-weapons-europe.

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inherently positive and confidence-building, without considering whether the Russians actually would agree, rather simply assuming that they do.

In reality, such an agreement would not necessarily be the case. The Russians may or may not agree, and their considerations regarding such a zone would never be limited to narrow thought processes about limiting nuclear weapons. Such a zone cannot be understood in isolation from policy and strategy. Instead, as a Western analyst of the original Baltic NWFZ suggested,

> Nuclear-free zones cannot be agreed upon in isolation from these and other aspects of military strategy. This is notably true for those who assume that removing nuclear weapons from a specific region means that that region will not be the target of nuclear weapons.[2]

A parallel perspective is enunciated by Russian strategist Andrei Kokoshin: "Interaction in the nuclear area largely rests not just on hardware, but also on nuclear deterrence formulas and concepts."[3]

A Brief History of the Baltic NWFZ Concept

The notion of turning the Baltic Sea region into a nuclear weapon free zone emerged during the Cold War as a local response to the nuclear dimension of the superpower rivalry. Unlike Baltic NWFZ ideas now emerging in response to recent confrontation between Russia and the West, during the Cold War it was not a stand-alone concept; it emerged as an addition to the older notion of a Nordic NWFZ.

The origins of the Nordic NWFZ suggestion are disputed. Although Finnish President Urho Kekkonen unofficially proposed its creation in 1963 and is credited with developing the idea to some level of detail, Soviet Premier Nikolai Bulganin had already entertained similar ideas at least as early as 1958. At that time, he suggested such a zone for Denmark and Norway; a year later, Nikita Khrushchev raised the issue again to propose adding the Baltic Sea to it. And in 1961, Swedish Foreign Minister Östen Undén also considered such a zone.[4]

[2] Gary L. Guertner, "Nuclear strategy in the Nordic region," *Journal of Baltic Studies,* vol. 16, no. 1 (1985), p. 10.
[3] Andrei Kokoshin, "Ensuring Strategic Stability in the Past and Present: Theoretical and Applied Questions," Belfer Center Report, June 2011, p. 34.
[4] George Maude, "Finland, Norway, and the prospective Nordic nuclear-free zone," *Journal of Baltic Studies,* vol. 16, no. 1 (1985), p. 18; and Rein Taagepera, "Inclusion of the Baltic Republics in the Nordic nuclear-free zone," *Journal of Baltic Studies,* vol. 16, no.1 (1985), p. 35.

Ultimately, over the ensuing 20 years, little progress was made on the Nordic NWFZ. The Nordic countries were already broadly opposed to a nuclear presence on their soil. Although technically they all could have developed nuclear weapons during those two decades, the Nordic members of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) prohibited peacetime deployment of nuclear weapons on their soil. As Norwegian Labour politician Johan Jørgen Holst explained at the time,

> [T]hree of the Nordic states are members of NATO. They have made no reservations with respect to the applicability to their territories of the general defence concept upon which the coalition defence is based. They draw on the nuclear umbrella provided by the United States. The alliance to which they belong involves an extension of positive security assurances. Complete "nuclear abstinence" is incompatible with alignment with nuclear weapon states. Airfields may be used by nuclear capable aircraft, naval ships with nuclear weapons may call on ports, navigation aids may be used by nuclear weapon carriers, etc. Hence, Norway's policy on nuclear weapons, like that of not permitting the basing of foreign troops during peacetime, has never been defined in inclusive terms, but rather in terms of explicit exclusions.[5]

Yet, it was broadly understood simultaneously that an explicit, but critically lopsided, NWFZ provided little benefit to the West. "It includes two NATO countries (Denmark and Norway) and two neutral ones (Sweden and Finland), but no Warsaw Pact territories. As such, the NWFZ proposal has too little to offer to the NATO countries; it could tie their hands in some future contingency without imposing the least obligation on the Warsaw Pact countries."[6] Finally, the Soviet Union, despite Khrushchev's vague remarks about including the Baltic Sea in a Nordic NWFZ, steadfastly refused to consider any Soviet territory for such a zone throughout the 1970s.

The concept remained in limbo until the early 1980s, when rising interest in discussing the Nordic NWFZ, led by Sweden, coincided with Baltic dissident politics within the Soviet Union. In 1981, in response to a potential breakthrough when Soviet Union leader Leonid Brezhnev seemed to offer a way to expand the purview of a NWFZ into the Baltic region, 38 Baltic

[5] Johan Jørgen Holst, "A Nuclear Weapon-Free Zone in the Nordic Area: Conditions and Options—A Norwegian View," *Bulletin of Peace Proposals,* vol. 14, no. 3 (1983), pp. 227-228.

[6] Taagepera, "Inclusion of the Baltic Republics in the Nordic nuclear-free zone," p. 33.

dissidents from Soviet-occupied Latvia, Estonia, and Lithuania signed an open letter to Brezhnev for inclusion of the Baltic countries in a Nordic NWFZ. Four of the authors/signatories were later arrested. This open letter ultimately had little effect. The Nordic countries found it politically awkward to consider, and the Soviet Union remained vaguely but broadly intransigent about inclusion of Soviet-controlled territory. From Soviet Premiers Brezhnev to Yuri Andropov, the Soviet position was that "any Soviet territory would remain *adjacent* and hence not included. But the vague expression 'and substantial ones at that' left the door open to all sorts of hopes precisely because it lacked any specific substance."[7] A few short years later, the Soviet Union had collapsed, the Cold War ended, and the relevance of a Nordic/Baltic NWFZ diminished until 2014.

Sporadic consideration of a Baltic-specific NWFZ, as a stand-alone entity rather than an adjunct to a Nordic NWFZ, reemerged after the Russian invasion and annexation of Crimea and the rise of tensions between Russia and the West. The Stimson Center published a report in 2015 on reducing the risks of nuclear war, which noted that "[i]mplementing a Baltic NWFZ would necessitate removal of NATO nuclear weapons from Germany and Russian weapons from Kaliningrad if, indeed, they are already there."[8] A clutch of European analysts raised the issue again in 2020. Based on certain institutional cycles—foremost among them a planned German replacement of its dual-capable Tornado aircraft with Eurofighter Typhoons and dual-capable F-18s, which set off a debate about Germany's nuclear sharing role within NATO—they determined that a window of opportunity exists for arms control between NATO and Russia, regardless of the actual political relations between the two sides. Their proposal is less geopolitically unequal than the one proposed by the Stimson Center—it aims to restrict nuclear weapons from the entirety of European Russia.[9] The Progressive Party of Latvia has made creating a Baltic NWFZ a key part of its political platform. In November 2020, the Progressive Party organized a seminar in Riga with the Freedom and Solidarity Foundation of Latvia and Friedrich Ebert-Stiftung-Baltic States to explore the topic.

[7] Taagepera, "Inclusion of the Baltic Republics in the Nordic nuclear-free zone," p. 42.
[8] Blechman, Bollfrass, and Helley, "Reducing the Risk of Nuclear War in the Nordic/Baltic Region," p. 10.
[9] Fuhrop, Kühn, and Meier, "Creating an Opportunity to Withdraw U.S. Nuclear Weapons from Europe."

Russia's Escalation Management and Deterrence Theory

All proposals for a Baltic NWFZ, whatever their degree of development, are ethnocentric. They assume that Russians are just as concerned about hypothetical nuclear war as the West and would similarly interpret efforts toward restricting nuclear weapons in the Baltic region as a move toward de-escalation of tensions to build mutual confidence. Such attitudes disregard actual Russian thinking. Russian theories on escalation management and deterrence comprise a crucial, all but ignored, context, which would condition positive hopes ascribed to any Baltic NWFZ. Before Russian escalation management theories are explored, it is crucial to discuss four foundational issues: Russia's threat perceptions, non-strategic nuclear weapon arsenal, categorization of war, and post-Cold War history of nuclear theory.

First, Russia's primary threat perception stems not from nuclear weapons but from the precision revolution. This perception led to an array of precise missile technologies taken so seriously that Russian President Vladimir Putin consistently suggests that they are "comparable in their effect to nuclear weapons."[10] The Russian view is that the combination of American ballistic missile defense and Prompt Global Strike enables "a unified counterforce concept targeting [Russia's] shrinking numbers of strategic forces."[11] As Michael Kofman, director of the Russia Studies Program at the CNA Corporation, notes, "Russia's current nuclear strategy is intended to answer the challenge posed by the precision revolution, grappling with the threat of massed aerospace attack using long range precision guided weapons, electronic warfare, stealth, and similar technologies."[12] Besides this global threat perception, Russia is also concerned about the Baltic region more specifically; various Russian military analysts believe it will serve as a launching pad for an attack against Russia, whether by hybrid or precision means.[13] This threat perception

[10] Cynthia Roberts. "Revelations about Russia's Nuclear Deterrence Policy," *War on the Rocks,* June 19, 2020, https://warontherocks.com/2020/06/revelations-about-russias-nuclear-deterrence-policy/.

[11] Dmitry (Dima) Adamsky, "If War Comes Tomorrow: Russian Thinking About 'Regional Nuclear Deterrence,'" *The Journal of Slavic Military Studies,* vol. 27, no.1 (2014), p. 169.

[12] Michael Kofman, "Sound Nuclear Policy Must Understand and Address Russian Nuclear Strategy," *CATO Unbound,* Sept. 30, 2020, https://www.cato-unbound.org/2020/09/30/michael-kofman/sound-nuclear-policy-must-understand-address-russian-nuclear-strategy.

[13] Sergey Sukhankin, "David vs. Goliath: Kaliningrad Oblast as Russia's A2/AD 'Bubble," *Scandinavian Journal of Military Studies,* vol. 2, no. 1 (2019), p. 100.

is hardly a new. Soviet war planners, particularly in the navy, were obsessed with the same danger during the interwar period.[14]

Second, any Baltic NWFZ primarily would affect Russian non-strategic nuclear weapons (NSNWs). Unfortunately, this arsenal has never been transparent; rather, "[T]he size and the status of the NSNW stockpile is one of Russia's most well-kept secrets. . . . Experts are uncertain about the arsenal's distribution among the services, its location and deployment status."[15] As early as 2012, Russian arms control and nuclear weapons specialist Igor Sutyagin suggested that Russia possessed about 1,000 operationally assigned NSNWs, (roughly half of other estimates), of which he believed nearly half to be deployed in western Russia.[16] In 2020, nuclear scientist Hans Kristensen, tracking the Russian nuclear arsenal for *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, suggested that "Russia today has approximately 1,880 nonstrategic nuclear warheads assigned for delivery by air, naval, ground, and various defensive forces." Moreover, he claims that "[i]t is possible that there are more nuclear-capable systems and that this inventory is growing."[17] Due to a notorious lack of transparency, a precise understanding of the arsenal itself is implausible.

Third, Russians differentiate among three intensities of wars: local, regional, and large-scale/global. Local wars are limited both in political goals and military means and occur predominantly between the immediate warring parties. Examples include the Russo-Georgian War of 2008 and the war in Donbas, Ukraine. The Russian military does not anticipate a role for nuclear weapons in such wars. Regional wars involve a substantial number of participants, including major states and even coalitions, and are waged for important objectives. A hypothetical war between NATO and Russia would already begin at the regional classification. Large-scale war is global in character, involves full national mobilization, and radical political goals.[18] Considering Russian deterrence theories as they relate to regional war is crucial to evaluate any hypothetical Baltic NWFZ proposal. Russian military planners expect regional war to be hard-fought from the outset, including "decisive aims by both sides and conduct of armed conflict in all domains"; "the massive use of precision weapons of various basing means, electronic warfare and all-new

[14] Gunnar Åselius, "Soviet Naval Perceptions of the Baltic Sea, 1938-41," in Michael H. Clemmesen and Marcus S. Faulkner, eds., *Northern European Overture to War, 1939-1941: From Memel to Barbarossa* (Leiden: Brill 2013), pp. 91-114.
[15] Adamsky, "Russian Thinking About 'Regional Nuclear Deterrence,'" pp.167-168.
[16] Igor Sutyagin, "Atomic Accounting: A New Estimate of Russia's Non-Strategic Nuclear Forces," RUSI Occasional Paper (Nov. 2012), p. 2.
[17] Hans M. Kristensen and Matt Korda, "Russian nuclear forces, 2020," *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, vol. 76, no. 2 (2020), p. 111.
[18] Katarzyna Zysk, "Escalation and Nuclear Weapons in Russia's Military Strategy," *RUSI Journal,* vol. 163, no. 2 (2018), p. 6.

means of armed conflict"; "the destruction of facilities in the rear area, of the economy and communications in the entire territory of the warring parties"; and "the conduct of air operations with decisive strategic tasks."[19] This context is the one in which Russia might employ nuclear weapons, particularly NSNWs, for purposes of escalation management.

Fourth, escalation management is a substantially novel concept for Russia. During the Cold War, the Soviets

> rejected the U.S. theory of 'limited nuclear war,' imposed professional anathema on researching it, and hardly explored its conventional analog. The logic of Flexible Response was rejected upfront, the notions of 'escalation dominance' and 'control', were rebuffed, the view of TNW [tactical nuclear weapons] as a battlefield tool of limited war was perceived as doctrinal nonsense.[20]

In the old Soviet view, nuclear warfighting was waged uniquely to achieve global victory. This view changed in the 1990s, as suddenly Russians were free to import the sophisticated—if not necessarily always realistic—deterrence theories produced in the West. Foreign intellectual stimulus combined with gross Russian military inferiority produced an over-reliance on nuclear weapons for national defense, particularly against a hypothetical NATO threat.

Although the original post-Soviet posture was effectively massive retaliation, the Russians themselves hardly believed their threat's credibility. A less annihilating, but still nuclear, option was required.

> Russian theorists had started debating whether Russia would have to choose between defeat and all-out nuclear war in regional conflicts because of the degraded state of Russian conventional forces. They argued sub-strategic nuclear weapons offered a potential way to defeat an adversary in the theatre of military operations."[21]

[19] Dave Johnson, "Russia's Conventional Precision Strike Capabilities, Regional Crises, and Nuclear Thresholds," Livermore Papers on Global Security, vol. 3 (Feb. 2018), p. 16.
[20] Adamsky, "Russian Thinking About 'Regional Nuclear Deterrence,'" pp. 181-182.
[21] Kristin ven Bruusgaard, "Russian nuclear strategy and conventional inferiority," *Journal of Strategic Studies* (2020), p. 13.

Between 1997 and 2002 two levels of deterrence emerged in Russian military thought: global and regional. NSNWs were particularly crucial for the latter.[22] This conceptual development led to a Western interpretation of Russian nuclear strategy as "escalate to de-escalate," which was not entirely correct, but also not entirely incorrect.

Current Russian thinking has developed further from this foundational, two-level concept of deterrence. The most recent Russian nuclear doctrine (*Foundations of State Policy of the Russian Federation in the Area of Nuclear Deterrence*, approved by Putin by decree N355 on June 2, 2020), from the outset suggests a concept of deterrence different from that broadly understood in the West: "Nuclear deterrence is carried out continuously in peacetime, during the period of direct threat of aggression, and in wartime, up to when nuclear weapons begin to be used."[23] Western concepts of deterrence tend to end when war begins. Ideas of intra-war deterrence have been suggested in the past by Western thinkers, such as Herman Kahn who wrote about hypothetical ladders of escalation. For the most part, these concepts have been strategically and morally controversial, as well as logically unconvincing. However, this overall theoretical structure is what the Russians are elaborating as they seek to make credible potential threats of nuclear weapon use in regional war.

> Today, Russian strategists consider it important to take all the steps on the deterrence ladder in order to facilitate deterrence stability and not allow the adversary to achieve escalation dominance. This is both to make deterrence by fear inducement, and deterrence via limited use of force more credible, and to reduce the risk of potential unintended escalation resultant from nuclear employment, which is a concern in many analytical works.[24]

The resulting theory hypothesizes potential nuclear use in regional war to preserve deterrence—that is, to prevent either an anticipated escalation in the conflict from regional war to a larger-scale, global war or to deter the opponent from pushing for a decisive victory in a regional war, particularly one which might threaten the existence of an ally or even the survival of the Russian regime

[22] Anya Fink and Michael Kofman, "Russian Strategy for Escalation Management: Key Debates and Players in Military Thought," *Center for Naval Analysis* Research Memorandum, April 2020, p. 7.
[23] "Foundations of State Policy of the Russian Federation in the Area of Nuclear Deterrence," CNA Information Memorandum, June 2020, Center for Naval Analysis Russia Studies Program, Russian Federation, p. 2.
[24] Michael Kofman, Anya Fink, and Jeffrey Edmonds. "Russian Strategy for Escalation Management: Evolution of Key Concepts," *Center for Naval Analysis* Research Memorandum (April 2020), p. 27.

itself. Ultimately, Russian nuclear weapons exist not necessarily to deter use of nuclear weapons against Russia, which the Russians do not rate particularly highly in their threat perception, but rather to deter attempts to put Russia into too desperate a military and geopolitical situation through non-nuclear war. "The purpose of Russia's escalation management strategy is to deter direct aggression, preclude a conflict from expanding, prevent or preempt the use of highly damaging capabilities against the Russian homeland that could threaten the state or the regime, and terminate hostilities on terms acceptable to Moscow."[25]

Katarzyna Zsyk, professor at the Norweagian Institute for Defence Studies, has summarized the logic of how the Russian military aims to manage escalation, which is worth quoting at length for its encapsulation of the logic at play in the Russian theory.

> The primary objective of limited nuclear use would be political: to coerce the adversary to cease aggression through a demonstration of Russia's determination and readiness to bring hostilities to a halt. That would include retributory strikes against enemy forces, also with NSNW, in a bid to change the balance of power and demonstrate readiness to inflict 'unacceptable' damage on the enemy, but not 'unbearable' or 'irreversible' damage, intended for a situation when state survival would be at risk, most likely in a large-scale or global conflict. It would be based not as much on the assumption that the adversary would be unable to respond to Russian limited first use due to the unavailability of military options, but rather on a political calculation and persuasion that Russia has a greater stake in the conflict than the adversary, which therefore would be unwilling to run the risk of escalation. The concept aims therefore to highlight 'the asymmetry of interests' and manipulate the enemy's perception of risk and cost to the point where it is no longer willing to bear them and would accept the political terms of capitulation ending the conflict. It also aims to stress the asymmetry of capability, assuming the adversary would be unable to answer in a similar way (with NSNW) and therefore risk escalation with use of strategic nuclear weapons, which is precisely the strategic dilemma that the 2018 NPR [Nuclear Posture Review] aims to address.[26]

[25] Michael Kofman and Anya Loukianova Fink, "Escalation Management and Nuclear Empowerment in Russian Military Strategy," *War on the Rocks*, June 23, 2020, https://warontherocks.com/2020/06/escalation-management-and-nuclear-employment-in-russian-military-strategy/.
[26] Zysk, "Escalation and Nuclear Weapons in Russia's Military Strategy," p. 7.

A key difference between the theory of escalate to de-escalate as understood in the West and the actual Russian theory of escalation is that

> [F]or Russian military thinkers, escalation management is not necessarily about winning or de-escalation. As a conflict progresses, escalation management approaches are intended to force off-ramps or negotiations that may result in a termination of the conflict on terms favorable to Russia or deter the entry of other participants. They may also keep the conflict going but prevent its escalation from a regional to a large-scale war, for example.[27]

Russia is clearly uninterested in de-escalating into a loss, but this is hardly surprising.

Russia would seek to achieve the political effect of de-escalation or the "off-ramp" through a number of succeeding phases in the use of force as necessary. A demonstrative phase "is likely to include an increase in the readiness of armed forces, deployments of combat formations from garrisons, demonstrative launches, exercises, combat patrols with visible forces, and weapons tests."[28] If this phase proves insufficient to deter the enemy, the next phase involves inflicting "adequate" or "deterrent damage":

> These actions can intensify into the use of strategic conventional weapons against targets of economic or military significance, and potentially even transition into single or grouped nuclear strikes. These conventional or nuclear strikes can initially be away from the opponent's territory and then progress to strikes on the opponent's territory itself. For example, some have suggested indirect nuclear employment, which is "safer"—e.g., offensive nuclear mining of ports or sea lines of communication, and strikes against the territory of a third party that is not the primary aggressor.[29]

Such limited strike options have been categorized as demonstrative, single, and grouped—respectively, an attack designed to inflict minimal damage; an attack with a single missile against a single target; and a group of missiles against critical targets.[30] If grouped strikes fail to deter the enemy, then the theory reaches its

[27] Kofman, Fink, and Edmonds, "Russian Strategy for Escalation Management," pp. 18-19.
[28] Kofman, Fink, and Edmonds, "Russian Strategy for Escalation Management," p. 21.
[29] Kofman, Fink, and Edmonds, "Russian Strategy for Escalation Management," p. 21, emphasis in original.
[30] Johnson, "Russia's Conventional Precision Strike Capabilities, Regional Crises, and Nuclear Thresholds," pp. 48-49.

limitations and any subsequent use of force, including nuclear fire, fits within the warfighting and especially retaliatory category.

Three caveats of this Russian theory of escalation management regard precision weapons, the coherence of the theory, and its level of political acceptance. *First,* although the theorized Russian strategy is a response to the precision revolution, Russia itself has also been pursuing precision weapons; it recognizes that at lower levels of conflict intensity or in preemptive situations even NSNWs—let alone the strategic forces—may still not be credible. Russia's developing precision arsenal demonstrates its determination to be ready to act on any and every level of conflict escalation. While one may hope that Russia might eventually phase out its NSNWs due to the assumed nuclear-comparable capabilities of precision weapons, observers caution against such a conclusion. Russia's precision, long-range arsenal "has reduced dependence on the nuclear toolkit, shifting the need or consideration of nuclear employment away from the initial period of war, but the Russian military expects a great-power war to eventually involve nuclear weapons and is comfortable with this reality."[31] Use of nuclear weapons will inevitably have psychological effects which cannot be achieved by any conventional weapon. Russia's improving conventional missile capability gives it flexibility but does not and cannot replace its nuclear arsenal, whether strategic or non-strategic.

Second, although analysts such as Katarzyna Zysk and Michael Kofman, among others, have portrayed a theory which is broadly coherent, Dima Adamsky, Associate Professor at the Lauder School of Government, Diplomacy and Strategy at the IDC Herzliya, in particular, has been skeptical of its overall coherence. In 2014, he suggested that

> [d]octrinal postulates related to regional deterrence are not always supported by actual assets, several capabilities exist in a conceptual vacuum, and nuclear industry initiatives are disconnected from official policy. The notion of regional deterrence is detached from the arsenal that should supposedly support it. NSNW have no meaningfully defined mission, and no deterrence framework has been elaborated for this arsenal.[32]

In a later article, he suggested that "Russian thinking on this matter has never been coherent. The causal mechanism underlying this approach, defined in the

[31] Kofman, "Sound Nuclear Policy Must Understand and Address Russian Nuclear Strategy."
[32] Adamsky, "Russian Thinking About 'Regional Nuclear Deterrence,'" pp. 164-165.

West as 'regional nuclear deterrence' or 'deterrence and de-escalation doctrine', has not been officially elaborated."[33]

Third, regardless of coherence or lack thereof, the degree of official, political purchase that Russia's theory of escalation management may enjoy is unclear. As Kofman and his colleagues admitted,

> [A] central limitation of this study is that we do not know the extent to which Russian military thinkers' concepts and plans highlighted here are approved and likely to be put into action by the Russian political leadership. . . . They may not subscribe to the entirety of modeling and logic advanced in military thought on the extent to which limited use of force can render escalation control.[34]

Theory is not strategy; it is a theoretical input into strategy-making. In a contingency, the military would present options to Putin—options which may be more or less coherent—but whether or not he would act on any of the options offered is a different question. Putin's history may suggest the opposite: He "has consistently communicated that he believes escalation—horizontal or vertical —in a military conflict with the United States and NATO could not be easily limited. Russian military planners, some authors in Russian military journals, and perhaps those of the naval strategy might disagree."[35] Dave Johnson's warning is apt:

> A "nuclear threshold" is not a fixed point in space or time. It is a political decision to use nuclear weapons in response to a variety of triggers, any of which—according to some national metric or in combination with other triggers—could lead to that decision. The level of conflict at which the nuclear threshold can be crossed is not decided in the moment. It is determined, in part, by earlier decisions shaping the nuclear forces.[36]

Russian military thinkers theorizing escalation management with a definite but perhaps incoherent nuclear dimension are still far removed from Russian political leaders who would actually act upon such ideas in a crisis or conflict.

[33] Dmitry (Dima) Adamsky, "From Moscow with coercion: Russian deterrence theory and strategic culture," *Journal of Strategic Studies*, vol. 41, no.1-2 (2018), p. 38.
[34] Kofman, Fink, and Edmonds, "Russian Strategy for Escalation Management," pp. 3-4.
[35] Anya Loukianova Fink and Olga Oliker, "Russia's Nuclear Weapons in a Multipolar World: Guarantors of Sovereignty, Great Power Status & More," *Daedalus*, vol. 149, no. 2 (Spring 2020), p. 46.
[36] Johnson, "Russia's Conventional Precision Strike Capabilities, Regional Crises, and Nuclear Thresholds," p. 68.

A Baltic NWFZ and Russian Escalation Management

The question remains: How might a proposed Baltic NWFZ be received in Russia? Proponents in the West see it as an inherently confidence-building measure and project their own expectations onto the Russian perspective. Yet, this unexamined assumption may not necessarily be true. In recent years, Russia consistently has been suspicious of the West and its intentions. Since the 2008 Russo-Georgian War, many Russian theorists have believed Russia to be in the midst of an information war against the West. As a result, "[a]ctions of Western states that are supposed to be a way of avoiding war, a substitute for escalating to war, can often be seen as acts of war by Russian leaders."[37]

Its current theory of escalation management suggests that the Russian military, at the very least, would not look kindly upon a Baltic NWFZ proposal and undoubtedly would make its perspective heard in the Kremlin. For the past 30 years, nuclear weapons, including NSNWs, have played a crucial part in Russian defense, broadly to counter its conventional inferiority. The Russian army is no longer as incapable as it once was, but Russian threat perceptions still emphasize the U.S. military's conventional superiority and its assumed ability to launch a devastating disarming and decapitation strike against Russia using long-range precision weapons. A key element of Russia's response involves the threat or even the use of nuclear weapons, a buttress which even Russia's own improving precision weapons cannot replace. As Professor Sutyagin noted,

> The size and structure of Russia's non-strategic nuclear-warhead stockpile is determined by the number of tasks assigned to Russia's armed forces. Asking Russia to reduce its non-strategic nuclear weapons (and therefore abandoning some of the nuclear tasks that these weapons fulfill) without addressing the security concerns that create these tasks would inevitably undermine Russia's perceived security.[38]

The Russian military likely would view any proposal to include Russia in a Baltic NWFZ, therefore, as an attempt to weaken Russia's national defense by disrupting its ability to act at any point on its theoretical escalation ladder. Such a proposal would be considered even more questionable if the whole

[37] Oscar Jonsson, *The Russian Understanding of War: Blurring the Lines Between War and Peace* (Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 2019), p. 157.
[38] Sutyagin, "Atomic Accounting," p. 70.

Russian Western Military District were included and not just Kaliningrad. A Baltic NWFZ's effect on Russian capabilities would equal a major U.S disarming strike against Russian NSNW capabilities in the region. The exception, however, is that in such a diplomatic disarming strike, Russia could not retaliate in a way foreseen and considered significant by their theory of escalation management. Even offering withdrawal of all U.S. NSNWs from Europe is unlikely to move the Russians. They see their NSNW capability as inherently asymmetric in the first place, meant to counter U.S. conventional superiority. They do not think about the symmetrical NSNW situation in Europe.

Moreover, given concerns among some Russians about the Baltic region as a potential springboard for adversarial NATO activity against Russia, a Baltic NWFZ proposal might reinforce suspicions of NATO's intentions in and around the Baltic Sea. This suspicion could increase rather than reduce tensions in the region as the Russians react to the evolving threat that they perceive.

The putative danger of a Baltic NWFZ to Russia would only increase as the proposal increasingly reduces regional NSNW capabilities. Restrictions on nuclear warhead deployment alone would be threatening, easily broken in times of necessity—depending on context. Given Russian threat perceptions, they may discredit any opportunity to return NSNWs to the Baltic region and instead anticipate an overwhelmingly effective U.S. aerospace blitzkrieg. During the Cold War-era Nordic NWFZ discussions, Holst made the same point about the flimsiness of a mere nuclear weapon ban: "If nuclear weapons were to be used in defence of Norway they would have to be delivered by weapon systems which are based outside Norway or transferred to Norway in an emergency without prior physical arrangements in Norway. In principle, the same conditions would apply in the event that a NWFZ were to be established."[39]

If in response, restrictions were to be proposed on NSNW delivery systems, the Russian perception of threat would be even greater. Such a proposal would definitely preclude the Russians from acting upon their escalation management theory. Almost by definition NSNW delivery systems have been dual-capable:

> [T]raditional delivery vehicles for tactical nuclear weapons were dual-purpose—front-line strike aircraft, medium-range bomber aircraft, artillery, ground-to-ground missiles of the ground forces, air interceptor missiles and fighter-interceptor aircraft of the air defense troops, sea-launched missiles and torpedoes deployed on submarines

[39] Holst, "A Nuclear Weapon-Free Zone in the Nordic Area," p. 229.

> and surface ships, carrier-launched and land-based aircraft of the Navy.[40]

This scenario remains the case today, albeit at substantially smaller numbers and varieties of delivery systems than at the height of the Cold War. Including these delivery systems, with their dual capacity to fire both conventional and nuclear payloads, any Baltic NWFZ would weaken the Russian defensive system even further. This situation, in turn, would be resisted more stridently by the Russian military and would raise further suspicions about NATO's intentions in the Baltic region.

Summing Up

Russia, despite having a relatively unsophisticated deterrence and escalation management theory during the Cold War, today has developed a quite sophisticated theory, which is broadly comparable to the late 1950s and early 1960s efforts of American nuclear theorists such as Thomas Schelling and Herman Kahn. Russia's theory was conceived to counter the threat of U.S. long-range precision weaponry and to ensure national defense through the ability to achieve deterrent effects in both peace and war to prevent conflicts from escalating in ways disadvantageous to Russia. This theory relies on Russia's own long-range precision missiles together with its NSNWs, both of which share similar tasks but neither of which can replace the other within this highly developed theory, causing the Russian military at the very least probably to react negatively to a proposed Baltic NWFZ. Rather than reinforcing stability, such a proposal may ironically decrease stability.

This is not to argue that a Baltic NWFZ is *inherently* destabilizing. Based on Russia's theory of escalation management and their suspicions of the United States and NATO both globally and in the Baltic region, there is a solid chance that a NWFZ would increase rather than decrease instability. Russians tend to think in terms of effects and outcomes. The effects of a conventional disarming strike versus a diplomatic NWFZ would be broadly comparable, albeit through different means of achievement—the NWFZ could be considered a mere diplomatic disarming strike. Further, Russian political leaders may not agree with the nuclear calculus presented in the military's deterrence theories. There is evidence to suggest that Putin, in particular, would be somewhat skeptical of the military's theories in practice. The political leadership could decide to override military concerns to some degree if it judges diplomatic and

[40] Kokoshin, "Ensuring Strategic Stability in the Past and Present," p. 33.

geopolitical benefits to be greater than loss of capacity to implement a theory of escalation management in which it may lack confidence or belief.

One cannot simply and ethnocentrically assume that the opposite party manifests a mirror image of one's own values and thinking. Ethnocentric mirror-imaging was dangerous in nuclear strategy during the Cold War. In nuclear arms control today, it is also dangerous although not necessarily in the same way or to the same degree. Regarding perspectives about—and prospects for—a hypothetical Baltic NWFZ, arms controllers cannot be careless in their assumptions. They must consider the full range of plausible Russian perspectives which may emerge in reaction to their proposals, including those based on Russia's propounded theories of escalation management and the political considerations, which may constrain them.

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