change of narrative to Polish citizens; unfortunately, their knowledge about the threat of a nuclear attack by Russia is limited.

Recent research conducted by the Public Opinion Research Center (Research Report No. 27, 2025) reveals that 61% of respondents believe that Poland can be confident in NATO's allies in the potential defense of our borders. However, 28% of respondents do not believe in this confidence. Compared to February 2024, the perceived confidence in NATO's assistance has decreased significantly by 18%, whereas those stating that it cannot be ensured has increased by 12% (Research Report No. 27, 2025).

Time will tell in which of two directions the wide-scale changes will unfold: (1) the threat of Russia's use of nuclear weapons will be an exclusive component of the narrative of the state authorities aimed at deterring aid efforts by NATO countries toward Ukraine; or (2) an attack by Russian military forces using nuclear weapons in the war with Ukraine will become a reality. It is also possible that the repercussions of certain strategic decisions could lead to a nuclear confrontation involving the NATO bloc itself.

CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

The authors declare that there are no ethical issues or conflicts of interest in this research. ■

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TIME FOR A RE-THINK? US-RUSSIAN ESCALATION AND THE NEED FOR A NEW DETERRENCE TRIFECTA

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The US-Russian relationship has always been a thorny relationship to manage, but since Putin's return to the Russian presidency in 2012 this relationship has become more fraught, mainly because of developments in Ukraine. Since the Maidan in 2013–14 and especially since Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, tensions between the two nuclear-armed great powers have spiraled upward, with no end in sight.

In the first weeks and months after the invasion, the West sanctioned Moscow repeatedly, boycotted Russia in important international organizations, booted Russia from the SWIFT global financial system, and sponsored campaigns to "cancel" any Russian NGO, business, or individual that allegedly supported the Russian regime. In response, Russia stepped up its attacks on Ukrainian positions, introduced new weapon systems in its fight to subjugate Kyiv, sold advanced weapons to US adversaries, and targeted training camps in far western portions of Ukraine, within miles of the Polish border. More recently, Russian actions have intensified.

The resolution of previous US-Soviet crises led to important agreements regulating the relationship. For example, after the Cuban Missile Crisis ended in November 1962, President Kennedy and Premier Khrushchev signed the Limited Test Ban Treaty in 1963, the first Cold War–era agreement on nuclear arms; its goal was to slow the pace of technological advancements and deployable nuclear armaments. After NATO's Able Archer nuclear exercises in early November 1983 led to unprecedented Soviet preparations for nuclear engagement—some in the Soviet Politburo believed the exercises were substantially different from previous ones and were a genuine attempt at a US first strike—calmer heads prevailed, and the two sides ultimately ratified the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty (INF) in 1987, eliminating an entire class of nuclear weaponry (Fraise and Egeland 2023).

However, in the post-Ukraine era, many of the cornerstone arms control agreements no longer are in effect. For example, the United States pulled out of the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty (ABM) in 2002; 17 years later, it also withdrew from the INF Treaty. This leaves only one Cold War-era nuclear arms control treaty in place: the New START Accords, which caps deployed nuclear warheads and bombs to 1,550 (Liang 2024); yet, the five-year extension of New START runs out in less than 18 months, which leaves little time to negotiate a follow-on agreement. In addition, Russia's Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov claimed in January 2024 that Russia would not pursue further negotiations until "the West fully renounce(es) its malicious course aimed at undermining Russia's security and interests" (Adamopoulous 2024).

This development follows the publication in June 2023 of an article by Sergei Karaganov, a political scientist, dean of Moscow's Higher School of Economics, and former adviser to both Presidents Yeltsin and Putin that was unusual for intimating the possible use of nuclear weapons. Karaganov (2023) wrote that because the West is ignoring Russia's security interests, has "lost its fear of nuclear war," and is pursuing a policy of continuing escalation over the war in Ukraine, Moscow must "arouse the instinct of self-preservation that the West has lost... and make nuclear deterrence a convincing argument again by lowering the threshold for the use of nuclear weapons [which has been] set unacceptably high."

Although never proposing a clear and specific course of action, Karaganov raises the possibility of Russia's use of nuclear weapons, either on the battlefield or against Western training, intelligence, or supportive facilities in NATO-member states. He

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also suggests that Russian nuclear doctrine needs to be altered to include a more expansive list of nuclear response options; until recently, Russia's security doctrine only allowed for the use of a nuclear response if the country was attacked with WMDs or if a conventional attack threatened the state's very existence (Об основах государственной политики Российской Федерации в области ядерного сдерживания [On Main State Policies of the Russian Federation in the Area of Nuclear Deterrence] 2020).

Whether Karaganov's musings were a trial balloon or disinformation that was meant to put the West on its back foot (he is no longer an official adviser to President Putin and the Kremlin can claim plausible deniability), his article was immediately and roundly criticized by both Western and Russian journalists, academics, and former government authorities (Arbatov and Stefanovich 2023; Cimbala and Korb 2023; Fabrichnikov 2023; Hersh 2023; Rutland 2023; Timofeev 2023). Still, the issue has not gone away, and the escalatory actions on both sides have again precipitated an ever-greater crisis.

This "pressure cooker" relationship has brought some American experts to call for some breathing space to reevaluate what really motivates Kremlin decision making and to reassess the true causes of the current conflict. George Beebe (2024), a former director of Russia analysis at the CIA, worries that Russian experts actually believe that the United States has lost its fear of nuclear war; he suggests that now is a good time to reconsider Russian debates on how to respond to continued escalation. Stephen Walt (2024) argues that continuously upping the ante on Ukraine is a failed Western endeavor, because it misunderstands the reasons why the Kremlin invaded Ukraine: Putin acted out of fear and insecurity, rather than to pursue aggressive aims. Continuing to escalate will just beget further counter-escalation.

I argue that these developments call for a framework of response, a **new deterrence trifecta**. This response is built not only on the familiar concept of **capabilities** (which mandate that they be *credible*, as well as *communicated* by the defending country to the target country) but also a renewed focus on **assurance** while adding a third important component, **status confirmation**. This means not only credibly communicating one's capabilities to the target country but also providing assurances that if the target country's behavior is in consonance with the defender's desires, the defending country will not alter its behavior or take advantage of the target country's abeyance. These two arms of the trifecta are contingent on a third one: status confirmation and respect afforded to the target country, especially one such as Russia, whose leaders—after enduring an era of economic collapse and military and political marginalization in world affairs—*perceive* their state to have been unduly maligned and ultimately ostracized or, perhaps worse for them, ignored, by the West (Rotnem 2018).

The current Russian leadership perceives that every blow received must be parried. Thus, the escalatory spiral continues. In the time since Karaganov's essay, significant steps have been taken up the ladder. In summer 2023, Storm Shadow cruise missiles were provided to Ukraine, and later that year, M1A1 Abrams tanks were delivered. In July 2023, the United States decided to send cluster munitions to Ukrainian forces and scheduled deliveries of F-16s: nuclear-capable aircraft that Russia insists present a clear and present danger should they be deployed in Ukraine. Ukrainian pilots have been trained on that platform now for many months, and the F-16s will enter the fray sometime this year. Additionally, ATACMS missiles were provided to Kyiv in April 2024, and authority has allegedly been given to use them deep inside Russian territory. After the recent NATO Summit in Washington, DC, the United States and Germany decided to deploy intermediate-range nuclear missiles in Germany starting in 2026. Moreover, twice now Ukrainians have destroyed or badly damaged nuclear early-warning facilities in Russia proper, in Krasnodar (Armavir), and near their border with Kazakhstan (Orsk).

Of course, at each step, Russia, too, has responded in a similar escalatory fashion: reportedly killing dozens of French advisers in Kharkiv in January 2024, deploying nuclear weapons in Belarus in March, conducting combat-readiness exercises for its strategic deterrence forces in May, and admitting Belarus into the Shanghai Cooperation Organization in July. This escalation follows yet another prominent Russian academic's advice to both change Russia's nuclear doctrine and remind the West about nuclear deterrence, a la Karaganov (Trenin 2024).

A new deterrence trifecta is built not only on the familiar concept of capabilities (but also a renewed focus on assurance while adding a third important component, status confirmation.

Some scholars argue that the historical record in the Ukraine war demonstrates that nuclear deterrence is working and that the "evidence from the Ukraine war appears largely consistent with the idea that nuclear weapons do, in fact, have significant deterrent effects" (Bell 2024). Bell cites as evidence that Russia has not yet attacked Polish bases supplying munitions to Ukraine nor other NATO countries. Others (Dickinson 2024) argue that the successful Kursk invasion by elite Ukrainian forces in late summer 2024 "makes a mockery of Putin's 'red lines,'" arguing in a similar vein to Arceneaux (2024) that the "tepid response to the Kursk invasion, cast doubts upon the credibility" of Putin's nuclear warnings. Timothy Snyder (2023) argues more forcefully that, by robustly arming Ukraine, the West may be preventing the use of nuclear weaponry, because by practicing "omnipotent submission"—that is, "self deterrence" or restraining ourselves in the face of escalating threats or actions from the Kremlin—we are actually increasing the likelihood of a nuclear exchange.

However, just because the Kremlin has not struck Polish or NATO bases does not mean that the world is not edging ever closer to the nuclear precipice. Indeed, after the Kursk invasion, Putin's administration signaled rather strongly that the West is close to regime "red lines" by allegedly introducing North Korean troops into the combat theater in the Kursk region, by changing Russia's nuclear doctrine and lowering the threshold for the use of such weapons, and by employing a seemingly effective, novel weapon system ("Oreshnik") that the world had never seen.

Hence, a new deterrence trifecta, tailored for the Russian case but applicable to others, may help both deescalate and deter Russia from further aggressive actions. Traditional notions of

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deterrence typically required the four "Cs": capabilities, credibility, communication, and credible assurances. The United States and the West have attempted to deter Russia by denial and by punishment, but this has proven insufficient to change its behavior.

I argue that in the current case the West has offered Russia few credible assurances, preferring to focus on threats and capabilities.

Given the unparalleled and ever-spiraling escalation in the US-Russia relationship and that Putin's actual red lines cannot be known, as well as the fact that very little, if any, communication exists between Moscow and Washington (with apparently no reliable back channels existing such as those that helped defuse past crises), now is the prudent time for voices and perspectives such as Beebe's and Walt's to be part of discussions on implementing an enhanced, deterrence trifecta approach toward Russia. As O'Brien (2024) notes, the "longer a war goes on, the more politically intense and brutal it gets. People start contemplating doing things they would not have contemplated at the start." The time is ripe for consideration of a deterrence trifecta approach.

Listening to Russia's side and understanding their leaders' perspectives on the current imbroglio doesn't signify a reward or compromise (or appeasement), but a type of extended *assurance that includes a third aspect, status confirmation.*

I do not use the term "credible assurances" in terms of rewards, even though Glenn Snyder's (1966) broader definition of deterrence includes economic, military, and political sanctions and rewards as critical components. Robert Jervis (1979) also claimed that if "relations are to be transformed… rewards and compromises may be more effective than threats."

Instead, in the new deterrence trifecta, credible assurances do not signify a reward or compromise or even appeasement; instead, they are a "guarantee that a threat is fully conditional on the behavior of the target" (Glaser, Weiss, and Christensen 2024). Credible assurances, therefore, improve the probability of deterrence's success, as demonstrated convincingly by Glaser and coauthors in their recent *Foreign Affairs* article on the Taiwan-US-China relationship: Credible assurances provided by both the United States and Taiwan to China actually strengthen, not weaken, deterrence against future Chinese aggression.

Similarly, listening to Russia's side and understanding their leaders' perspectives on the current imbroglio do not signify a reward or compromise or appeasement, but rather a type of *extended* assurance that includes a third aspect beyond capabilities and credible assurances: status confirmation. As stated previously, the Russian leadership perceives that the United States and the West are ignoring or disregarding Russia's security interests. Thus, Russian elites desire some modicum of respect or recognition—that is, status confirmation—from the Other, the United States (Rotnem 2018). Engaging in negotiations while taking account of Russia's perceptions, and discussing their rationale for invading Ukraine, not only accords them respect and status but also gives the United States an opportunity to communicate additional credible assurances; for example, that if Russia halts hostilities, the United States would not bring Ukraine into Nato for some undetermined period of time. As Mazarr (2018) avers, "Especially when dealing with a peer rival that believes it has a rightful claim to international status, it can be very difficult to merely threaten a potential aggressor into submission."

Therefore, our economic and military deterrence capabilities would be stronger if we were to deploy a diplomatic approach that provides certain credible assurances, as well as a modicum of status confirmation; the former have been absent for some time now, whereas the latter is *perceived* to have been impaired or nonexistent by the current Russian leadership since at least the 2007 Munich Security Conference. Perhaps doing so will get us off the "Damoclesian carousel" we have been on since at least 2022, if not since Putin's third term in office began in 2012.

CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

The author declares no ethical issues or conflicts of interest in this research. ■

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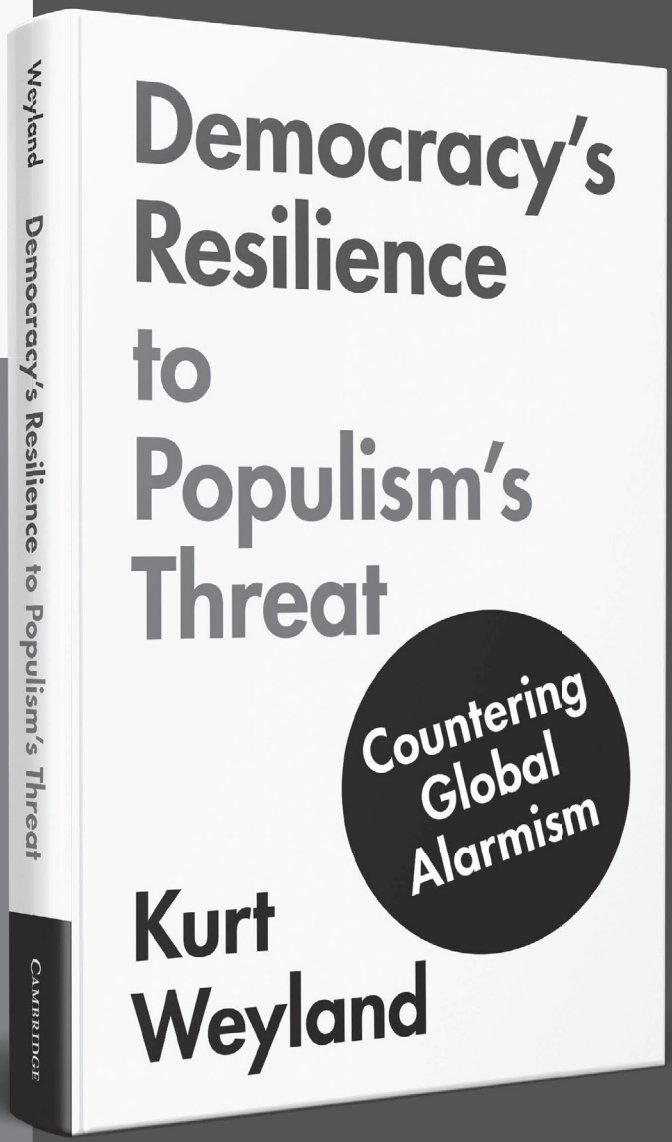
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