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Putin Lowers Threshold for Using Nuclear Weapons in Updated Doctrine, Sparking Escalation Concerns

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An RS-24 Yars mobile intercontinental ballistic missile system launch vehicle rolls down Moscow's Red Square. **Valery Sharifulin / TASS**

President Vladimir Putin approved changes to Russia's nuclear doctrine Tuesday, expanding conditions under which nuclear weapons could be used, including in cases of attacks by non-nuclear states supported by nuclear powers.

The updates follow reports that U.S. President Joe Biden has authorized Kyiv to use long-range missiles to strike targets inside Russia, a move the Kremlin warned could lead to "a significant new round of escalation."

The revised doctrine states that nuclear strikes could be justified by "aggression against the Russian Federation ... by any non-nuclear state with the participation or support of a nuclear state."

It also identifies threats such as "the deployment by a potential adversary of missile defense systems, medium- and short-range ballistic missiles, precision non-nuclear and hypersonic weapons, strike drones and directed energy weapons" as grounds for potential nuclear retaliation.

The document emphasizes that Russia reserves the right to use nuclear weapons in response to any weapons of mass destruction used against it or its allies, or in the event of aggression using conventional weapons that threaten the sovereignty or territorial integrity of Russia or Belarus.

According to nuclear arms control expert Pavel Podvig, a senior researcher at the UN's Institute for Disarmament Research, a key change in Russia's updated doctrine is the language shift from stating that aggression "puts the very existence of the state in jeopardy" to saying that it "poses a critical threat to the sovereignty and/or territorial integrity" of the state.

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Putin first proposed the revisions in late September as Ukrainian officials sought permission from Kyiv's Western allies to use long-range missiles against targets inside Russia.

At the time, the Kremlin leader warned a policy change in that direction "would in a significant way alter the very nature of the conflict" and "mean that NATO countries, the U.S. and European countries are at war with Russia."

Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov later told reporters that the proposed changes to Russia's nuclear doctrine should be viewed as a warning to any countries involved in attacks on Russia "by various means, not necessarily nuclear."

On Tuesday, when asked whether the timing of the nuclear doctrine changes was linked to reports that the Biden Administration had authorized Kyiv to carry out long-range strikes inside Russia, Peskov said the updates were "published in a timely manner."

"The president himself said these changes were in the final stages of preparation," he told reporters.

Under Russia's nuclear doctrine, decisions to use nuclear weapons remain at the discretion of the president. The updates to the doctrine take effect immediately.

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