

Territorial aspect of nuclear deterrence since the war in Ukraine: US, Russia, China, and Europe

Abstract

This article examines how Russia's war against Ukraine has reshaped the relationship between nuclear deterrence, territorial revision and political security across the five nuclear-weapon states that gave Ukraine assurances of territorial integrity and security in exchange for nuclear disarmament in 1994. The study develops two concepts synthesizing nuclear leverage and territories to secure governing elites or populations: *geonuclear expansion* and *geonuclear protection*. Drawing on securitisation theory and qualitative analysis of Russia, China, the United States, the United Kingdom and France, the study examines changes in nuclear agendas since 2014. It finds Russia to be a case of accomplished *geonuclear expansion*, China an alerting or conditional case, and the three democratic nuclear powers cases of *geonuclear protection*. The comparison shows that the credibility of territorial assurances differs between democracies and autocracies. The war in Ukraine therefore represents a global turning point in the nuclear politics of territorial borders.

Introduction

Russia captured Ukrainian Crimea in 2014 and declared four further Ukrainian regions annexed in 2022, in both cases by conventional force. Nuclear weapons captured no territory in either case. Russian president confirmed that he had been prepared to place Russian nuclear forces on alert against outside intervention to shield annexation (Al Jazeera, 2015). While Allison finds that Russian nuclear intimidation after 2022 also 'has had some success in constraining western military aid to Ukraine' (Allison, 2025, p.1770). Nuclear weapons made territorial acquisition by conventional military forces harder to reverse or deter from outside allies of Ukraine.

This combination has still not been fully theorised. Deterrence scholarship usually treats nuclear weapons as tools for protecting a state's own territory and interests, and explains why states organise those tools in different ways for that purpose (Schelling, 1966; Narang, 2014). The coercion literature asks the opposite question — whether nuclear threats can compel an adversary to give something up — and answers largely in the negative: nuclear weapons are 'useful mainly for deterrence and self-defense, not for coercion' (Sechser and Fuhrmann, 2017). Neither formulation captures what the Ukrainian case displays: nuclear leverage directed not at the state losing territory but at the third parties who might restore it. Existing studies confirmed the fact of Russia's nuclear coercion towards West to deter meaningful support for Ukraine, however the ultimate goal of the full combination – annexation of territories shielded by nuclear threat remains undertheorized (Giles, 2023; Arndt, Horowitz and Onderco, 2023; Allison, 2025); Bell exemplifies the nearest concept, observing nuclear arsenal that allowed Russia to pursue aggression against Ukraine (Bell, 2024).

This study proposes two concepts to describe that relationship and its opposite, and they form the argument that runs through the paper. *Geonuclear expansion* denotes a configuration in which a state uses nuclear leverage to facilitate, shield or consolidate a revision of borders that serves the security and legitimacy of its governing elite. *Geonuclear protection* denotes a configuration in which nuclear leverage deters such revision in order to preserve the spatial and material conditions of population security. In neither configuration is territory the ultimate object of protection: it is the medium through which

something else is secured — the ruling elite in the first, the population in the second. The instrument and the medium are identical; what differs is the referent object. The central claim, tested across the five states recognised as nuclear-weapon states under the Non-Proliferation Treaty, is that geonuclear expansion is pursued by autocracies for the security of the autocratic regime, while geonuclear protection is exercised by democracies for the security of their populations — both through territory, and both through nuclear leverage. Russia's nuclear capabilities deployed in Belarus, perceived by Europe as a territorial threat, instancing the empirical case of such a concept (Horovitz and Wachs, 2024).

The contributions are theoretical and empirical. Theoretically, the study supplies the missing concept pair and a framework, built from securitisation theory's referent-object apparatus (Buzan, Wæver and de Wilde, 1998; Balzacq, 2008), that joins the autocratic-survival and population-security literatures to nuclear scholarship and yields three testable assumptions. Empirically, it provides a structured comparison of the five nuclear-weapon states' changed nuclear agendas following Russian aggression against Ukraine from the 2014 annexation of Crimea to the 2022 full-scale invasion, drawing on primary doctrine, official statements, treaty texts, voting records and independent force assessments; it includes the first systematic analysis of the British and French decisions of 2025–26; and it tests declaratory credibility against the assurances that two autocracies and three democracies gave Ukraine in December 1994, when Ukraine transferred its nuclear arsenal to Russia in exchange for assurances of territorial integrity.

What Russia demonstrated in Ukraine is not contained by the region in which it occurred. A nuclear-armed state revised the borders of a non-nuclear neighbour by conventional force, used nuclear threats to raise the cost of reversing that revision, and kept the territory — as one of the five states on which the Non-Proliferation Treaty's central bargain rests. The demonstration has registered in the nuclear policy of the other four, across two theatres: in the doctrine, deployments and declaratory policy of the United Kingdom, France and the United States; in assessments connecting Chinese nuclear expansion to a territorial objective in the Taiwan Strait; and in an American extended deterrent now affirmed over territory China claims as well as over the Euro-Atlantic. Read across the five, the war is a global turning point in the relationship between nuclear weapons and borders rather than a regional conflict with nuclear features.

The stakes are sharpest for non-nuclear states. Ukraine surrendered what was then the world's third-largest nuclear arsenal through a negotiated process, accepting non-nuclear status under the Non-Proliferation Treaty in exchange for assurances that its sovereignty and existing borders would be respected (Budjeryn, 2022; United Nations, 1994). If nuclear leverage can shield the conventional revision of a non-nuclear state's borders, the territorial integrity of every non-nuclear state rests on two conditions it does not control: whether a nuclear-armed neighbour treats its arsenal as a shield for expansion or a guarantee of the status quo, and whether the assurances of its guarantors bind when honouring them becomes expensive. Kulacki states the second point in general form: a refusal to honour a positive security assurance given to one state damages the credibility of the negative assurances owed to all others (Kulacki, 2022). The study's practical contribution follows. For a non-nuclear state, the diagnostic question is not how many warheads a neighbour holds, but what its nuclear leverage is *for* — which referent object it serves, in which direction territory is moving, and whether the state advancing it has honoured comparable commitments before.

The study proceeds in four parts: a review of the literature on nuclear coercion and on the nuclear responses to the war; the theoretical framework and its three assumptions; the analysis of the five cases; and the comparison and findings.

Literature review

Two strands of scholarship bear directly on the question. The first theorises nuclear coercion, its relationship to territory, and what the state is ultimately protecting. The second analyses how the other nuclear-armed states have revised their nuclear agendas since Russia began using nuclear threats to shield territorial capture in Ukraine.

Nuclear coercion, territory and the protected party

Schelling established the distinction on which the field rests, between deterrence, which prevents an adversary from acting, and compellence, which induces an adversary to act or acquiesce (Schelling, 1966). The subsequent literature has largely tested the second and found it demanding. Sechser and Fuhrmann provided the most systematic evidence, showing that nuclear threats cannot force adversaries to give up what they hold (Sechser and Fuhrmann, 2017). Authors revealed that nuclear weapons are useful mainly for deterrence and self-defence, not for coercion, and their benefits are almost entirely defensive rather than offensive (Sechser and Fuhrmann, 2017). Narang complements this by showing that nuclear postures vary systematically with identifiable sources, so acquisition produces no uniform deterrent effect (Narang, 2014).

This shielding function has clear theoretical roots. The stability–instability paradox suggests that stability at the nuclear level can make violence below that threshold more likely (Jervis, 1989). Bell shows that acquiring nuclear weapons can reshape a state’s foreign policy, including by enabling aggression and expansion (Bell, 2015). Altman provides the conventional dimension: since 1945, states have taken territory mainly through *fait accompli* rather than through coercive demands (Altman, 2017).

These components have not remained separate, and this study does not claim they have. Colby assembled them prospectively four years before the full-scale invasion, arguing that under mutual nuclear vulnerability the *fait accompli* is the most attractive offensive strategy available to the weaker party, and that Russian or Chinese nuclear forces could deter the United States from the escalation required to restore an ally’s territorial integrity (Colby, 2018). Horowitz and Wachs applied the logic to Ukraine within two months of the invasion: the war confirms the stability–instability paradox, Putin directed his nuclear threats at the West rather than at Ukraine, and NATO’s eastern members might fear a Russian *fait accompli* followed by an attempt to ‘shield those gains with its nuclear weapons’; the same analysis observes, in passing, that nuclear weapons may serve the continuity of political regimes (Horowitz and Wachs, 2022). Chesnut supplies the empirical instance: Russia used nuclear threats ‘to deter attacks against territory it has annexed’, a linkage more credible around long-held Crimea than around the four regions annexed in September 2022 (Chesnut, 2023) — a differential this study reinterprets, since on the account developed here the shield’s success is measured against the third parties able to reverse a revision, not against the victim resisting it. Bell broadens the point, arguing that nuclear shielding is not new but a familiar effect of nuclear weapons (Bell, 2024); Blank links Russia’s conduct to regime security, describing the war as ‘a wager on his regime’s survival’ (Blank, 2022); and Asghar shows that whether nuclear acquisition leads to belligerence depends on domestic institutions — although his explanation focuses on who makes the decision, rather than whose security the decision is meant to protect (Asghar, 2025).

A separate literature explains why territory might be worth taking for a regime rather than a state: Svoboda’s twin problems of authoritarian control and power-sharing (Svoboda, 2012); Gerschewski’s pillars of repression, legitimisation and co-optation (Gerschewski, 2013); Tir’s finding that unpopular governments initiate militarised territorial disputes (Tir, 2010); and Weiss and Dafoe’s evidence that

authoritarian publics punish leaders who threaten force and retreat (Weiss and Dafoe, 2019). Other studies connect territorial control to the security of populations, through the vulnerability of civilians where front lines move (Costalli, Moro and Ruggeri, 2020; Lichtenheld, 2020) and the dependence of public provision on fiscal and legal capacity (Besley and Persson, 2010; Dincecco and Katz, 2016).

What remains undone is the conversion of the mechanism into an analytical instrument. Existing accounts are asymmetric in three respects. They are written from one side of the configuration — Colby as a problem for American force planning, Horovitz and Wachs as a risk to the European order — so the mechanism appears as something to defeat rather than a category into which conduct can be sorted. They are confined to the aggressor: no equivalent description exists of the identical instrument — nuclear leverage attached to a territorial boundary — operating to preserve borders rather than revise them, so the two uses are never placed on one axis and compared. And they stop at the territory, treating captured or defended ground as the endpoint, although the survival and population-security literatures establish that territorial control is instrumental to something further; Blank and Horovitz and Wachs gesture at regime continuity, but as a remark rather than a variable. This study addresses the gap on three fronts: it treats the identity of the ultimate referent object — governing elite or population — as the analytical variable, derived from securitisation theory rather than assumed from regime type; it makes territory the medium rather than the object of security, so that the direction of territorial change becomes an observable indicator of which configuration is present; and it constructs the concept pair, geonuclear expansion and geonuclear protection, so that the same instrument can be assessed across all five recognised nuclear-weapon states rather than in the aggressor cases alone.

How the other nuclear states responded to Russian nuclear blackmail

A second strand assesses Russian nuclear threats since 2022, and contains an unresolved debate about what they achieved. Sauer tests the war against deterrence, responsibility and coercion theory and concludes the weapons proved of little practical use (Sauer, 2024); Arndt, Horovitz and Onderco find the coercion failed in its principal object, the Kremlin having misjudged Ukrainian and Western resolve (Arndt, Horovitz and Onderco, 2023); Arceneaux weighs how seriously the threats warranted being taken (Arceneaux, 2023); Giles documents their effect on Western reactions (Giles, 2023). Bell replies that such inferences ‘may be overly strong’, since the weapons shielded aggression (Bell, 2024). Allison sits between the camps, finding that intimidation ‘while resisted, has had some success in constraining western military aid to Ukraine’ (Allison, 2025, p.1770). Horovitz and Wachs add the territorial dimension through Russia’s forward deployment to Belarus (Horovitz and Wachs, 2024).

Part of this strand has already joined the two halves of the relationship examined here. Futter and Zala state it most fully: incorporating occupied Ukrainian regions into Russia would render attacks there tantamount to attacks on Russian territory; Moscow was ‘effectively using nuclear threats to facilitate conventional aggression’; and Russian conduct revitalised the nuclear component of Western and NATO strategy and settled a two-decade question about European nuclear sharing (Futter and Zala, 2025). They also note that nuclear forces matter to the Russian elite for status and domestic standing — an observation this study develops rather than treats as novel. Von Hlatky and Lambert-Deslandes show that post-2022 sabre-rattling consolidated a nuclear-sharing arrangement several host states had been expected to leave (von Hlatky and Lambert-Deslandes, 2024), and the official record runs the same way (NATO, 2022; U.S. Department of Defense, 2022). A parallel policy literature asks what the nuclear-armed democracies should do, and has moved beyond the provider question: Tertrais posed the European bomb before the invasion (Tertrais, 2019); the *Survival* forums map the options (Fayet, Futter and Kühn, 2024; Fayet et al.,

2025); Chevreuil argues the war has ‘forced European allies to reengage with the language and logic of nuclear deterrence’ (Chevreuil, 2025); Bardio treats distance from French borders as a credibility variable (Bardio, 2025); Desmaele and Cooper argue that conventional counterforce offers escalation-management options nuclear threats cannot credibly supply (Desmaele and Cooper, 2026); and European Union analysis names the adversary configuration outright — a rapid Russian offensive against the Baltic states establishing ‘a fait accompli through overwhelming local superiority’, followed by nuclear threats to deter a European counteroffensive (European Union Institute for Security Studies, 2026).

Two gaps remain, and this study fills them. First, existing work shows that Russian nuclear-backed aggression caused the Western nuclear response, and stops there. It does not read the two as a single arrangement pointing in opposite directions — nuclear leverage used to take and hold ground, and nuclear leverage used to keep ground where it is — so the direction of territorial movement is never used to classify what a nuclear-armed state is doing with its arsenal. Its evidence base has also been overtaken by the British F-35A decision of June 2025, the Northwood Declaration of July 2025, and the French warhead increase and forward-deterrence doctrine of March 2026. Second, the literature now asks which territory a guarantee covers and how credibly, but not whose security the territory finally serves: Futter and Zala tie Russian nuclear forces to elite standing, and Bardio asks which European ground France might cover, yet neither turns the beneficiary — ruling elite or population — into a variable that can be read from observable evidence and compared across the five nuclear-weapon states.

Theoretical framework

Why autocracies may pursue territorial expansion

In autocracies, taking territory can serve the rulers rather than the state. Svolik shows that dictators face two threats: from the population they rule — the problem of authoritarian control — and from the elites they rule with — the problem of power-sharing (Svolik, 2012). Gerschewski shows that autocracies survive by combining repression, legitimation and co-optation (Gerschewski, 2013). Territorial expansion sustained by military mobilisation can feed all three, under conditions worth stating. War extends the security apparatus into society and supplies a standing external-threat justification for suppressing dissent — but this strengthens the ruler only if he controls that apparatus, since institutions built against coups differ from those built against popular unrest (Greitens, 2016). Territory is unusually potent politically: unpopular governments initiate militarised territorial disputes precisely because publics respond to territory with unusual intensity (Tir, 2010), and where war is too costly, autocrats substitute rhetoric, invoking external threats in place of actual diversionary war (Alrababa’h and Blaydes, 2021). Retreat carries a price: authoritarian citizens disapprove more of inaction after their government has threatened force (Weiss and Dafoe, 2019). And captured territory can pay for loyalty: occupiers can extract a surplus from seized industrial societies, but only ruthless ones (Lieberman, 1996), and the resulting rents aid autocratic survival chiefly by protecting rulers from rival elites (Wright, Frantz and Geddes, 2015) — evidence drawn from oil wealth, extended here to conquest by inference. External support from other autocracies can work in much the same way: von Soest identifies the different forms authoritarian collaboration can take (von Soest, 2015), while Casey shows that Soviet backing helped client regimes survive longer than Western support did, largely because it assisted with coup prevention (Casey, 2020). Territorial capture is therefore not automatically stabilising; it becomes a possible regime-survival strategy only when these conditions come together.

Why democracies prioritise defending territory

For democracies, territory is not the ultimate object of protection; the population is. Governments say so themselves: the United Kingdom defines its national interests as ‘the long-term security and social and economic wellbeing of the British people’ (HM Government, 2025a). Losing territorial control harms populations directly — civilians are most at risk where front lines shift (Costalli, Moro and Ruggeri, 2020), and ethnic cleansing is likelier in conventional wars ‘where territorial conquest takes primacy’ (Lichtenheld, 2020) — and indirectly, because the fiscal and legal capacity underpinning public provision and long-run growth depends on the state’s control of its territorial space (Besley and Persson, 2010; Dincecco and Katz, 2016). Neither indirect study argues that territorial loss destroys capacity, so the further step — that losing territory, population and productive assets degrades a state’s ability to protect those who remain — is a proposition examined here rather than a borrowed finding.

Nuclear leverage as an instrument of securitisation

Securitisation theory supplies the vocabulary, with two traditions kept apart. Buzan, Wæver and de Wilde define securitisation as the construction of an issue as an existential threat to a valued referent object — the thing being secured (Buzan, Wæver and de Wilde, 1998). Balzacq contests that account, arguing first that securitisation is audience-dependent and context-bound (Balzacq, 2005), and then that it ‘can occur or evolve without the assent of an identifiable audience’, so analysis should follow policy instruments rather than discourse (Balzacq, 2008). The second move licenses the method used here. Nuclear leverage — the use of nuclear capabilities, doctrines, deployments or signalling for deterrent or coercive ends — is treated as an observable instrument of securitisation, examinable directly. Deterrence uses that leverage to stop an adversary acting; coercion uses it to make an adversary act or accept a change (Schelling, 1966). Territory is the medium through which security is pursued, not the final goal of the employment of nuclear leverage. The referent object differs by regime type: in autocracies, the ruling elite and its survival (Svolik, 2012; Greitens, 2016); in democracies, the population (HM Government, 2025a).

Declaratory credibility

A fourth element completes the framework. Because declarations are easy to make, what distinguishes regimes is whether declared commitments constrain conduct. Institutional theory gives democracies an edge: alliances between democracies outlast those involving non-democracies (Gaubatz, 1996), and shifts in ruling coalitions lead non-democracies to abandon alliances early while equivalent shifts in democracies do not (Leeds, Mattes and Vogel, 2009). This finding is not uncontested. Leadership turnover can weaken democratic reliability (Gartzke and Gleditsch, 2004), and some autocracies can generate audience costs of their own (Weeks, 2008). The expectation is therefore probabilistic rather than absolute: on average, and all else being equal, declared nuclear commitments should constrain democracies more strongly than they constrain autocracies. The nuclear domain offers an unusually clean test, because in December 1994 all five recognised nuclear-weapon states — Russia and China on one side of the regime-type divide, the United States, the United Kingdom and France on the other — gave assurances about Ukraine’s territorial integrity at the same moment and in the same document family.

Assumptions

Assumption 1 — Geonuclear expansion. Autocratic regimes are expected to use nuclear leverage coercively in support of territorial expansion where that expansion serves the survival of the governing elite. The elite is the referent object, territory the medium, nuclear coercion the instrument.

Assumption 2 — Geonuclear protection. Democratic states are expected to use nuclear leverage as deterrence to protect territorial integrity where that integrity underwrites the physical and socioeconomic security of the population. The population is the referent object, territory the medium, nuclear deterrence the instrument.

Assumption 3 — Declaratory credibility. Where declared nuclear commitments conflict with the perceived survival interests of the governing elite, autocracies are expected to abandon them more readily than democracies abandon commitments that conflict with policy preferences. This applies both to declarations about a state's own forces and to assurances given to third states in exchange for their disarmament.

Analysis

Russia: accomplished and ongoing geonuclear expansion

Russia is the clearest completed case. Its seizure of Crimea in 2014 was a conventional *fait accompli*: Russian forces took control before Ukraine or outside powers had a realistic chance to reverse the move, matching Altman's account of the dominant way states have seized territory since 1945 (Altman, 2017). Nuclear leverage was part of the operation from the start, not something added later. A year afterwards, on state television, Putin confirmed he had been prepared to place nuclear forces on alert during the operation in case the West intervened — 'we were ready to do this', because Crimea 'is our historical territory' and the Russians there 'were in danger' (Al Jazeera, 2015). This instance demonstrates nuclear leverage was employed during the annexation of Crimea. Allison reaches a similar structural conclusion, warning that Russia's conduct risks turning strategic deterrence into a doctrine that enables territorial expansion by force under the protection of nuclear intimidation (Allison, 2025, p.1791). This is what geonuclear expansion conceptually represents: territory is seized conventionally, held under a nuclear shield, and used to secure a referent object that may differ from the one publicly declared.

The domestic pay-off followed the pattern the framework predicts. Putin's approval rose by up to twenty percentage points after the annexation and stayed high for years (Bussmann and Iost, 2024), and Burrett traces a corresponding shift after 2012 in the basis of his legitimacy, from economic performance towards nationalism, military strength and the presentation of the regime as Russia's defender against a hostile West (Burrett, 2025). This does not show that Crimea was taken to generate legitimacy; it confirms that territorial revision can produce it, and that the resource secures the governing elite against internal threat.

After February 2022 the nuclear shielding became explicit, and Russia itself stated whose stake the shield protects. Russia held roughly 4,309 warheads in early 2025, revised to about 4,400 for January 2026 (Kristensen et al., 2025d, 2026). Announcing mobilisation on 21 September 2022, Putin tied the defence of Russia's 'territorial integrity' to a warning that Russia would use 'all the means at our disposal', adding 'this is not a bluff' (President of the Russian Federation, 2022a); nine days later Russia declared the annexation of four regions it did not fully control (President of the Russian Federation,

2022b), extending a nuclear-protected definition of its own territory over land seized in an ongoing war. In January 2023 Medvedev, deputy chairman of the Security Council, drew the connection this study theorises in a single sentence: ‘the defeat of a nuclear power in a conventional war may trigger a nuclear war’, because ‘nuclear powers have never lost major conflicts on which their fate depends’ (Al Jazeera, 2023). Nuclear leverage, on this statement, exists to guarantee that the territorial war is not lost — and what losing would endanger is named as the *fate* of the power waging it. Russia’s revised deterrence principles of November 2024 then broadened the circumstances in which nuclear weapons could be used, while keeping sovereignty and territorial integrity at the centre of the doctrine (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, 2024; Kristensen and Korda, 2026). The leverage worked against third parties rather than against Ukraine: Allison finds it ‘has had some success in constraining western military aid’ (Allison, 2025, p.1770), a judgement the British government echoes in describing Russia’s ‘use of increased nuclear rhetoric in an attempt to constrain our decision making’ (HM Government, 2025a). This direction conforms to Schelling’s asymmetry — deterring intervention is a deterrent task, extracting capitulation a compellent one (Schelling, 1966) — and it defines the criterion on which the shield’s success must be judged. Measured against the actors it was actually meant to deter, the shield has endured throughout the full-scale invasion, just as it did over Crimea: no Western state has intervened directly, successive categories of assistance were delayed, limited or initially withheld under explicit nuclear intimidation (Giles, 2023; Allison, 2025), and no support sufficient to reverse the annexations has been provided, leaving the four oblasts under the protection of Russia’s arsenal. That Ukraine fights on inside annexed ground does not disconfirm the configuration, because geonuclear expansion is directed at deterring the allies from helping the victim preserve its territorial integrity, not at the victim itself — whose compellence is precisely what nuclear threats fail to achieve (Sechser and Fuhrmann, 2017). Russia therefore fits Assumption 1 as a configuration — elite security, territorial revision, nuclear shielding, consolidation under a continuing shield — while the stronger claim that the war was launched to preserve the regime remains an inference.

Russia’s territorial threat to Europe and its nuclear geography

The territorial claim did not stop at Ukraine, and neither did the nuclear posture supporting it. In December 2021 Moscow published draft treaties demanding that NATO withdraw forces from every state admitted after May 1997 and renounce enlargement — a demand to revise the security arrangements of a dozen sovereign states, backed by the threat of force (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, 2021). Russian officials then repeatedly questioned the territorial integrity of Eastern European states while nuclear capability moved into the same geography. On 9 June 2022 Putin said Peter the Great had not seized Swedish territory but had been returning and reinforcing it, citing Narva, and concluded that it had fallen to Russia’s lot to do likewise (Kremlin, 2022); the referent was understood to be Ukraine (Reuters, 2022), but the principle applied by its own logic to a city now Estonian, and Tallinn summoned Ambassador Lipayev over both the remarks and a Duma bill proposing to repeal the 1991 recognition of Lithuanian independence (ERR, 2022) — a bill never adopted (State Duma of the Federal Assembly of the Russian Federation, 2022). On 16 May 2023 Medvedev referred to Russia’s Baltic provinces and to a temporarily occupied Poland (Euronews, 2023) — phrases that are not equivalent, the second having been read as referring to the allied troop presence rather than to Poland’s borders (Stars and Stripes, 2023). On 21 July 2023 Putin called the western territories of present-day Poland a gift from Stalin that Russia would recall to Warsaw; Poland summoned the Russian ambassador (Kremlin, 2023; Notes from Poland, 2023). European governments responded by treating attack as a planning assumption:

the Integrated Review Refresh concludes that ‘we cannot discount the possibility of an attack against Allies’ sovereignty and territorial integrity’ (HM Government, 2023), and by 2025 Britain judged it must ‘actively prepare for the possibility of the UK homeland coming under direct threat’ (HM Government, 2025a).

The accompanying nuclear geography forms three concentric layers around Europe. Forward and land-based: Belarus removed its non-nuclear status, received dual-capable Iskander-M systems and modified Su-25 aircraft, saw a depot near Asipovichy rebuilt with the signature features of Russian nuclear storage (Kristensen and Korda, 2026), and was announced in August 2025 as the destination for the dual-capable Oreshnik missile, shown at a newly built forward base in December 2025 — leaving Russia, SIPRI concludes, with multiple means of delivering nuclear weapons from Belarusian territory, within range of Poland, the Baltic states, the Suwałki corridor and three NATO capitals (Kristensen et al., 2025a; Kristensen and Korda, 2026). Kaliningrad mirrors this from the opposite flank: the upgraded Kulikovo storage site shows ‘all the fingerprints of typical Russian nuclear weapons storage sites’ (Kristensen, 2018), Chernyakhovsk hosts dual-capable Iskander-M, and leaked December 2025 documents indicate an extended-range variant able to reach most of Central Europe (Kristensen and Korda, 2026). Sea- and air-delivered: dual-capable Kalibr missiles across the Northern, Baltic and Black Sea fleets make nuclear status indistinguishable from platform (Kristensen et al., 2025a); Russia fielded the nuclear-capable Zircon, received the Borei-A *Knyaz Pozharsky* and launched the Poseidon-capable *Khabarovsk* (Kristensen and Korda, 2026); deployed submarines into the Mediterranean, North Atlantic, Irish Sea and North Sea (Kristensen et al., 2026), prompting Britain’s Operation Atlantic Bastion (HM Government, 2025a); and dispersed its roughly sixty nuclear-capable bombers, including to Olenya within operating range of Norway and Finland, firing air-launched cruise missiles in an October strategic exercise (Kristensen et al., 2026; Kristensen and Korda, 2026), with Zapad exercises historically simulating nuclear use (Kristensen et al., 2025a). Read against the 2024 doctrine and the 2021 demand that NATO vacate its eastern members, the pattern is the geonuclear-expansion configuration positioned at continental scale: Ukraine is where it has been executed, Europe is where it is being staged. Assumption 3 is instanced directly, since the state violating Ukraine’s territorial integrity is the state that assured it in 1994.

China: alerting geonuclear expansion

China brings together three elements: a clearly stated territorial objective, the world’s fastest-growing nuclear arsenal, and a ruling party whose legitimacy is closely tied to the promise of reunification. It has not attempted forcible annexation and still maintains a declared no-first-use policy. What it shows, therefore, is not a completed case of geonuclear expansion, but the conditions that could precede one — assembled after Russia had already demonstrated how such a configuration can work.

The August 2022 white paper calls reunification ‘indispensable for the realization of China’s rejuvenation’ and ‘a historic mission of the Communist Party of China’, while stating that Beijing ‘will not renounce the use of force’ (Taiwan Affairs Office of the State Council and State Council Information Office of the People’s Republic of China, 2022). Chinese leaders would face real domestic costs if they backed down after threatening force (Weiss and Dafoe, 2019), although the government still has measurable tools for managing nationalist pressure (Quek and Chan, 2025). The link between Taiwan and party legitimacy is therefore significant, but not absolute. The arsenal is growing fastest in the world — roughly 620 warheads in January 2026, up from 600 (SIPRI, 2026; Kristensen et al., 2025b), with hundreds of missiles loaded into three northern silo fields and thirty further silos under completion,

though the U.S. Department of Defense gives a more conservative figure of ‘more than 100’ loaded silos (SIPRI, 2026; Kristensen and Korda, 2026; U.S. Department of Defense, 2025). The same American report records that Beijing ‘has also drawn lessons from the Russia–Ukraine war that are relevant to a Taiwan conflict scenario’, reinforcing modernisation ‘including the expansion of its nuclear deterrent capability’, and states the mechanism this study theorises with unusual directness: ‘strategic counterbalance’ ‘likely requires the PLA to build up its means of strategic deterrence — including nuclear deterrence — to sufficiently deter or restrain U.S. military involvement’, with Beijing ‘probably increasingly’ seeking to use nuclear deterrence to limit adversary involvement in a conventional conflict (U.S. Department of Defense, 2025).

The structure of the claim itself parallels Russia’s, and this is where the two autocracies most closely resemble one another. Russia justified Crimea as the recovery of ‘our historical territory’ inhabited by endangered kin (Al Jazeera, 2015) and declared four further regions incorporated on the same logic of historical entitlement (President of the Russian Federation, 2022b); China describes Taiwan not as a conquest but as territory awaiting ‘complete reunification’, a party mission and a precondition of rejuvenation (Taiwan Affairs Office of the State Council and State Council Information Office of the People’s Republic of China, 2022). The shared framing provides the legitimising mechanism set out in the framework: when a territorial claim is presented as the recovery of what already belongs to the nation, it can mobilise nationalist feeling more powerfully than a claim to newly acquired territory, while also increasing the domestic cost of any visible retreat (Tir, 2010; Weiss and Dafoe, 2019). What separates the two cases is not the structure of the claim or the possession of shielding-capable forces, but whether execution has been attempted. China’s restated defensive posture and no-first-use pledge point in the opposite direction (Ministry of National Defense of the People’s Republic of China, no date; Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People’s Republic of China, 2025), as does Yoder’s assessment that cross-Strait deterrence remains structurally stable and that forcible reunification would carry ‘extreme risks’ unless Chinese leaders faced ‘a desperate situation where military gambles would become attractive’ (Yoder, 2025).

A further indicator is grounded in Ukraine itself. NATO describes the PRC as a decisive enabler of Russia’s war through large-scale support for its defence industrial base (NATO, 2024). European enforcement has followed this assessment: the twenty-first sanctions package names Chinese and Hong Kong entities accused of helping evade restrictions on microelectronics, machine tools and semiconductor-processing equipment (Council of the European Union, 2026b), while the twentieth package targeted, for the first time, a Chinese state-owned entity in Belarus for producing Belarusian military goods (Council of the European Union, 2026a). Ukrainian evidence is more granular: Defence Intelligence of Ukraine estimates that 80 per cent of the electronics in Russian drones originate in China and recovered a decoy UAV built entirely from Chinese parts (Defence Intelligence of Ukraine, 2025), and Kyiv sanctioned five Chinese suppliers in July 2025 after Chinese components were found in Shahed drones downed over the capital (President of Ukraine, 2025). These flows sustain Russia’s capacity to prosecute a territorial war — supplied by an autocracy that itself assured Ukraine’s territorial integrity in 1994 in exchange for its disarmament. The conduct amounts to de facto acceptance of nuclear-shielded territorial capture. China is therefore a conditional case of geonuclear expansion: the antecedents of Assumption 1 are present, the outcome has not occurred, and the indicators warrant early analytical attention.

The United Kingdom: deterrence as population protection

British policy responded to Russian territorial aggression along two axes. The first is capability. The Integrated Review of March 2021 raised the stockpile ceiling from 225 to 260 warheads and ended publication of operational numbers (HM Government, 2021; Kristensen and Korda, 2026), reversing a reduction trajectory that had run through a target of 180 warheads at the 2015 Strategic Defence and Security Review (Arms Control Association, 2021). The Review attributed the reversal to ‘the evolving security environment, including the developing range of technological and doctrinal threats’ (HM Government, 2021), and the Defence Secretary explained it as an answer to what ‘the Russians and others have been up to in the last few years’ (Arms Control Association, 2021). The driver was Russian capability; the object of concern was the future credibility of a minimum deterrent in Europe — seven years after Crimea, before the full-scale invasion.

The second axis is territorial, and opens in February 2022. The 2023 Integrated Review Refresh, commissioned in response to the invasion, describes it as returning ‘large-scale, high intensity land warfare’ to Britain’s home region (HM Government, 2023). NATO’s Strategic Concept, adopted four months after the invasion, named Russia ‘the most significant and direct threat to Allies’ security’ and restated that ‘the fundamental purpose of NATO’s nuclear capability is to preserve peace, prevent coercion and deter aggression’ (NATO, 2022). The Strategic Defence Review of June 2025 opens on the same judgement — ‘The world has changed... The UK faces war in Europe, growing Russian aggression, new nuclear risks’ — and committed £15 billion to the sovereign Astraea warhead programme while reaffirming continuous at-sea deterrence (HM Government, 2025b). The geographical shift came that month: at least twelve F-35A aircraft for NATO’s dual-capable mission at RAF Marham, ‘the biggest strengthening of the UK’s nuclear posture in a generation’, reintroducing an air-delivered nuclear role for the first time since the Cold War (Prime Minister’s Office, 10 Downing Street and Ministry of Defence, 2025; Royal Air Force, 2025). In July 2025 the Northwood Declaration committed Britain and France to coordinating their deterrents against extreme threats to Europe — the first such commitment by either with a partner other than the United States (HM Government and Présidence de la République, 2025; Kristensen and Korda, 2026).

The referent object is stated in the governing documents, and it is the population. The National Security Strategy defines national interests as the wellbeing of the British people, notes that ‘nearly a billion people in the Euro-Atlantic are protected by the mutual defence clause’, and describes the deterrent as ‘our most important national capability’ (HM Government, 2025a). The Ministry of Defence identifies the states at which this demonstration is aimed: Russia, with more than 4,000 usable warheads and dual-capable systems used in Ukraine, and China, which is ‘undergoing an unprecedented programme of rapid nuclear expansion’ alongside ‘dangerous and destabilising activity in the South China Sea and the Taiwan Strait’ (Ministry of Defence, 2025). NATO’s assessment converges, describing Russian nuclear signalling, including the Belarus stationing, as ‘a posture of strategic intimidation’ (NATO, 2026) — the positioning examined in the Russia section above. Britain also prepares against direct threat to its own territory, tracking suspected sabotage vessels under Operation Atlantic Bastion (HM Government, 2025a).

British conduct since 2022 is consistent with the assurances given at Budapest and exceeds their minimum. In 2014 Foreign Secretary Hague defined the obligation as ‘to support, as we do, the independence and territorial integrity of Ukraine’ (UK Parliament, 2014). Britain has since licensed equipment ‘for the purpose of defending and regaining their sovereign territory’ (Department for Business and Trade, 2024), maintained with its G7 partners that the annexations will never be recognised (Foreign,

Commonwealth & Development Office, 2024), committed to sustained assistance under the 2025 UK–Ukraine Hundred Year Partnership (HM Government and Government of Ukraine, 2025), and declared jointly with France in March 2026 that both ‘will not be intimidated by Russian nuclear rhetoric’ (Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office, 2026a). Unlike Russia, which violated the assurance it gave, Britain upheld the principle it assured and bore real costs to help Ukraine hold and recover sovereign territory. The British case therefore grounds Assumption 2 — population as referent, allied territory as medium, deterrence as instrument — and instantiates the democratic side of Assumption 3.

France: from national to European deterrence

France’s response began operationally and became doctrinal. In March 2022 the French Navy put more than one ballistic-missile submarine to sea for the first time since the 1980s, probably in response to the invasion (Kristensen et al., 2025c); independent analysis records three of four boats deployed (International Institute for Strategic Studies, 2026). In April 2024 Macron identified nuclear deterrence as a component of the credible defence of the European continent (Présidence de la République, 2024b), and in March 2025 announced the reactivation of the nuclear mission at Luxeuil-Saint-Sauveur, with two additional Rafale squadrons by 2035 and the base first to receive the Rafale F5 and ASN4G missile — a plan SIPRI assesses will increase the French stockpile and roughly double the number of nuclear-capable Rafales (Ministry for the Armed Forces, 2025; Kristensen and Korda, 2026).

The territorial logic is explicit and attributed. Addressing the nation on 5 March 2025, Macron asked who could believe that today’s Russia would stop at Ukraine, called Russia a threat to France and to Europe, and announced the opening of the strategic debate on protecting France’s allies through its deterrent — one of two drivers the address names, alongside the changing distribution of responsibility within the alliance (Présidence de la République, 2025). The *Revue nationale stratégique* 2025 institutionalised the assessment: the principal threat to France and Europeans by 2030 is the risk of open war against the heart of Europe; a posture of nuclear intimidation heads the list of hostile Russian actions below the threshold of conflict; and further Russian offensives are judged possible against Ukraine, Moldova and the Balkans, or against NATO member states generally, as a test of Alliance cohesion (Secrétariat général de la défense et de la sécurité nationale, 2025). At Île Longue on 2 March 2026 the relationship became doctrinal: Macron announced *dissuasion avancée* — forward deterrence — and the first increase in the French warhead count since 1992, with nuclear-capable strategic air force elements deployable temporarily to allied territory under sole French authority, and participating partners’ territory gaining a clearly affirmed link with the French deterrent. He named Poland, the Netherlands, Belgium, Greece, Sweden and Denmark alongside the United Kingdom and Germany; Norway joined by June 2026, making nine (Présidence de la République, 2026a). The framework realises the dialogue Macron had offered at the École de Guerre in 2020 (Présidence de la République, 2020). No Baltic state is among the partners, although the Baltic states are where European analysis locates the most plausible *fait accompli* scenario (European Union Institute for Security Studies, 2026) — a boundary examined in the findings.

France’s declaratory record runs parallel. In a declaration issued alongside the Budapest Memorandum on 5 December 1994, France committed to respect Ukraine’s independence and sovereignty within its existing borders, borders alterable only peacefully and by agreement — though, unlike the Memorandum, without a consultation provision (France, 1994; Grant, 2014). France did not retreat from that commitment. Macron stated in September 2022 that France was supplying weapons so Ukraine could defend its territory (Présidence de la République, 2022); the 2024 France–Ukraine Security

Cooperation Agreement commits the parties to ensure Ukrainian forces can fully restore territorial integrity within the 1991 borders, recording €1.7 billion in French military aid in 2022 and €2.1 billion in 2023 across a ten-year term (Présidence de la République, 2024a). France sustained this in a nuclear-coercive environment its own president described in terms matching both configurations distinguished here: at Munich in February 2023 Macron observed that Russian aggression had been waged in the shadow of deterrence, while deterrence had, on the other side, been a significant factor in the allies' protection (Présidence de la République, 2023). NATO's Washington Summit Declaration, endorsed by France, characterised Russian nuclear signalling as coercive while affirming it would not deter Allied support (NATO, 2024); France and the United States jointly rejected the annexations (Présidence de la République, 2024c); and the commitment remains current through the Évian G7 Summit and a Franco-Italian declaration reaffirming support within Ukraine's recognised borders (Présidence de la République, 2026b, 2026c). France therefore exhibits geonuclear protection — population and allied Europe as referent, territory as medium, an extended deterrent as instrument — and upheld an assurance narrower than Britain's at material cost, supporting Assumption 2 and the democratic side of Assumption 3.

The United States: homeland and extended protection

The American arsenal, at roughly 3,700 warheads, and its European posture were already in place before 2022 (Kristensen et al., 2025e; Kristensen and Korda, 2026); the change after Russia's invasion was mainly doctrinal and geographical. The United States was itself a signatory to the Budapest Memorandum, and its conduct after 2022 went beyond the assurance's minimum. Between February 2022 and March 2026 it committed \$67.8 billion in defence articles and services to Ukraine — the largest contribution by any state — and although the delivery model shifted in 2025 towards allied-funded procurement under the Prioritized Ukraine Requirements List, American systems continued to flow (Congressional Research Service, 2026). That support continued in an environment Washington described as nuclear-coercive: the 2022 Nuclear Posture Review identifies Russia's invasion as evidence of an acute threat, and the Washington Summit Declaration characterised Russian nuclear signalling as coercive while affirming that it would not deter Allied support (U.S. Department of Defense, 2022; NATO, 2024). The state that gave the assurance therefore bore the greatest material cost to uphold it under explicit nuclear pressure — exactly the pattern Assumption 3 expects from a democracy.

The doctrinal trigger is stated in the governing documents. The 2022 National Defense Strategy lists defending the homeland first among four priorities, and the Nuclear Posture Review states that the deterrent 'undergirds all our national defense priorities, including defending the U.S. homeland, deterring strategic attacks against the United States, our Allies and partners' (U.S. Department of Defense, 2022). The capability record moves in step with the two adversaries' territorial behaviour. In Europe, the United States has continued upgrading nuclear storage vaults at RAF Lakenheath and is modernising up to 180 vaults across the continent, while the B61-12 completed forward deployment during 2024 and was confirmed 'fully forward deployed' in January 2025 (Kristensen and Korda, 2026). The arsenal was then extended: in October 2023, five days after the Pentagon reported the accelerating growth of China's stockpile, the Department of Defense announced the B61-13, a higher-yield variant 'reflective of a changing security environment and growing threats from potential adversaries', and the first unit was completed in May 2025, almost a year ahead of schedule — one of the most rapidly developed American weapons since the Cold War (U.S. Department of Defense, 2023; National Nuclear Security Administration, 2025).

Alaska illustrates the homeland leg. On 6 July 2022 the Speaker of the State Duma told deputies that if Washington disposed of Russian assets it should remember Russia had ‘something to take back’, naming Alaska (Moscow Times, 2022). A January 2024 presidential decree on registering the property of the former Russian Empire and Soviet Union abroad — a document naming no territory — was read by nationalist commentators as licensing claims up to Alaska, drawing an on-record State Department rejection: ‘certainly he is not getting it back’ (The Hill, 2024). The Department of Defense’s 2024 Arctic Strategy, issued expressly in response to the invasion, assesses that Russian Arctic capabilities ‘have the potential to hold the U.S. homeland, as well as Allied and partner territory, at risk’, and records the first combined Chinese–Russian bomber patrol into the Alaska air defence identification zone in July 2024 (U.S. Department of Defense, 2024). In September 2024 NORAD fighters escorted a nuclear-capable B-52H across Alaska in integrated, layered defence of the homeland (U.S. Air Force, 2024). A nuclear-capable element of American deterrence is built directly into the defence of the sovereign territory named in the adversary’s rhetoric.

In the Indo-Pacific, American extended deterrence explicitly covers territory China claims, and the referent object is stated as the allied population. In April 2024 Washington reaffirmed its ‘unwavering commitment’ to the defence of Japan ‘using its full range of capabilities, including nuclear capabilities’, confirming that Article V applies to the Senkaku Islands — administered by Japan, claimed by China (White House, 2024a). Tokyo names the precedent: Japan’s foreign minister welcomed the 2022 Nuclear Posture Review ‘in light of’ Russia’s aggression against Ukraine ‘with the threat of nuclear use’ and China’s build-up (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, 2022), and the two governments concluded their first Extended Deterrence Guidelines in December 2024 (U.S. Department of State and Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, 2024). On the Korean Peninsula the population referent is explicit: the Washington Declaration created the Nuclear Consultative Group (White House, 2023), and the resulting guidelines describe joint nuclear planning ‘with a focus on ensuring the continued safety and security of the people of the ROK’ (White House, 2024b). Assessed against the framework, the American case runs parallel to the British and French ones: population as referent — the American people, the people of the Republic of Korea, the defence of Japan; territory as medium — the homeland including Alaska, the Article 5 area, Japanese-administered islands under Chinese claim, the Korean Peninsula; nuclear deterrence as instrument, adapted expressly in reference to Russian territorial aggression and Chinese arsenal growth.

Comparative assessment (Table 1)

The first comparative observation is temporal. Nuclear adaptation is visible across all five states, but the analytically relevant trigger begins in 2014. Crimea was the first realised instance of the configuration: conventional forces changed territorial control by *fait accompli* (Altman, 2017), within the strategic space nuclear-level stability creates for violence below the threshold (Jervis, 1989), with nuclear forces prepared for alert against intervention (Al Jazeera, 2015). This chronology answers a possible objection: Britain’s reversal of reductions came in 2021, before the full-scale invasion but seven years into the deterioration Crimea began (Arms Control Association, 2021). February 2022 did not create the relationship between nuclear leverage and territory; it intensified a demonstrated mechanism. The five cases are therefore distinguished not by whether arsenals expanded after 2022, but by the territorial purpose their nuclear leverage serves — consistent with Narang’s finding that acquisition produces no uniform effect because postures vary with their sources (Narang, 2014).

Table 1. The five nuclear states compared

State	Territorial relevance	Nuclear leverage relevance	Compliance with assurances given to Ukraine	Geonuclear expansion/protection
Russia	Revision of Ukrainian borders; broader revisionist pressure on the European territorial order	Shields territorial seizure; has deterred direct allied intervention and constrained decisive support since 2014	Directly violated its assurance	Accomplished/ongoing geonuclear expansion
China	Reunification with Taiwan an explicit objective; force not renounced	Rapid expansion increasingly tied to restraining US intervention in a conventional conflict	Did not uphold the substantive purpose of its assurance; materially enabled Russia's war	Alerting/conditional geonuclear expansion
United Kingdom	Preservation of British, NATO and European territorial integrity	Capabilities adapted and geographically oriented against Russian territorial revision	Maintained commitments; materially supported Ukraine under nuclear pressure	Geonuclear protection
France	Preservation of French and European territorial integrity	Deterrence Europeanised and given a forward territorial role	Maintained its assurance; supported defence and restoration of Ukrainian territory	Geonuclear protection
United States	Preservation of homeland and allied status quo in Europe and the Indo-Pacific	Deterrence modernised and extended against Russian and Chinese revisionism	Maintained its Budapest commitment; largest material contribution to defend and restore territorial integrity	Geonuclear protection

Russia represents the completed configuration, and the framework's account of autocratic survival explains its form. The full sequence is present: conventional revision, nuclear leverage against external interference, and efforts to incorporate seized territory within the geographical scope of Russian deterrent claims (Chesnut, 2023). The leverage was aimed primarily at third parties rather than at Ukraine itself (Horowitz and Wachs, 2022). This fits Schelling's distinction between deterrence and compellence (Schelling, 1966) and reconciles the war with the finding that nuclear threats tend to fail when used to compel concessions, but can still work as deterrence (Sechser and Fuhrmann, 2017; Arndt, Horowitz and Onderco, 2023). The elite-security interpretation is supported by both the survival literature and Russia's own statements: unpopular governments turn to territorial disputes because territory can generate strong public responses (Tir, 2010); annexation produced a measurable rally effect (Bussmann and Iost, 2024) and provided a source of legitimation of the kind autocracies use alongside repression and co-optation (Gerschewski, 2013); mobilisation expands the coercive apparatus used to manage both of Svoboda's threats (Svoboda, 2012; Greitens, 2016); and retreat after explicit threats can create audience costs even in authoritarian settings (Weiss and Dafoe, 2019). Occupied territory finances loyalty only through coercive extraction (Lieberman, 1996), yielding rents that protect rulers from rival elites (Wright, Frantz and Geddes, 2015); and Medvedev's warning that the defeat of a nuclear power in a conventional war may trigger a nuclear war, because nuclear powers have never lost conflicts 'on which their fate depends', ties

the nuclear shield to the survival stake in the Kremlin's own words (Al Jazeera, 2023). The study does not claim regime survival was the sole cause of the war; it establishes the narrower proposition the framework requires — expansion generated elite-security resources, and nuclear leverage made the gains harder to reverse.

China appears to occupy the pre-execution stage of the same model: it has an explicit objective, keeps the option of force open, and frames the issue through the problem of external interference (Taiwan Affairs Office of the State Council and State Council Information Office of the People's Republic of China, 2022); it is expanding its arsenal faster than any other state (SIPRI, 2026); and its planning links strategic deterrence to the goal of limiting American involvement (U.S. Department of Defense, 2025). Its material sustainment of Russia's territorial war (NATO, 2024; Council of the European Union, 2026b; Defence Intelligence of Ukraine, 2025) adds the collaborative dimension the framework anticipates: authoritarian cooperation takes forms other than alliance (von Soest, 2015), and external support matters most when it strengthens a ruler's capacity to hold what has been taken (Casey, 2020). China is therefore an alerting case — a case in which the same antecedents that preceded Russia's completed configuration are accumulating before territorial execution has occurred.

The democratic cases invert the sequence, and the population-security literature explains their behaviour as more than alliance management. Territorial loss harms populations directly (Costalli, Moro and Ruggeri, 2020; Lichtenheld, 2020) and indirectly, through the capacity on which provision depends (Besley and Persson, 2010; Dincecco and Katz, 2016). The governing documents identify the corresponding referent: the wellbeing of the British people and nearly a billion Euro-Atlantic inhabitants (HM Government, 2025a); the security of France and the European states closest to the threat (Secrétariat général de la défense et de la sécurité nationale, 2025); the American people first among defence priorities, and the continued safety and security of the people of the Republic of Korea (U.S. Department of Defense, 2022; White House, 2024b). In each, capability change followed the perceived territorial threat and attached to territorial protection: an air-delivered NATO role restored (Royal Air Force, 2025), forward deterrence and the first French stockpile increase since 1992 (Présidence de la République, 2026a), the B61-12 fully forward deployed and a higher-yield variant fielded at speed (Kristensen and Korda, 2026; National Nuclear Security Administration, 2025).

The 1994 assurances provide the behavioural test. Because the analysis follows Balzacq's instrument-based account — reading deployments, doctrines and conduct rather than requiring an audience-accepted speech act (Balzacq, 2008) — the assurance record is evidence of the same standing as posture. Institutional theory predicts the observed asymmetry (Gaubatz, 1996; Leeds, Mattes and Vogel, 2009), with the expectation kept probabilistic by leadership turnover in democracies (Gartzke and Gleditsch, 2004) and audience costs in some autocracies (Weeks, 2008) — one reason China's restraint to date is consistent with the framework rather than anomalous within it. On this test the five separate clearly and in the same direction as their territorial orientation (Congressional Research Service, 2026; Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office, 2026b). The voting record points the same way: on both the 2014 resolution affirming Ukraine's territorial integrity and the 2022 resolution deploring the invasion, the three democracies voted in favour, Russia voted against, and China abstained (United Nations General Assembly, 2014, 2022). The pattern is not unbroken — the United States voted against a comparable resolution in February 2025, following a change of administration — but this is precisely the divergence the contested strand of the credibility literature anticipates (Gartzke and Gleditsch, 2004), and a reminder that Assumption 3 is probabilistic rather than categorical.

Conclusion

The war in Ukraine transformed the relationship between nuclear weapons and territorial security across all five recognised nuclear-weapon states, and the transformation began in 2014 rather than 2022. The comparison supports three findings.

Finding 1. Russia's nuclear-backed territorial capture in Ukraine is a turning point that activated rapid nuclear-capability development on both sides of the divide — among the defensively oriented nuclear democracies, the United Kingdom, France and the United States, and among the offensively oriented nuclear autocracies, Russia itself and China. The mechanism operated through the strategic space the stability–instability paradox identifies (Jervis, 1989), the emboldenment nuclear acquisition can generate (Bell, 2015), and the *fait accompli* as the operative means of taking territory (Altman, 2017). Its effects are visible on both sides: Russia broadened doctrine, deployed nuclear-capable systems to Belarus and announced the Oreshnik; China drew lessons from the war that reinforced the expansion of its deterrent (U.S. Department of Defense, 2025); Britain restored an air-delivered role and committed to Astraea; France increased its stockpile for the first time since 1992 and extended forward deterrence to nine partners; and the United States completed B61-12 forward deployment and fielded the B61-13 at unmatched speed. The turning point is longitudinal — a securitisation shift running from 2014 through the post-2022 period — rather than a technological shock, since most modernisation programmes predated the invasion. What changed was the territorial purpose attached to them.

Finding 2. Both configurations secure specific referent objects: in Russia and China, the governing elite; in the United States, the United Kingdom and France, the population. This applies securitisation theory's central category (Buzan, Wæver and de Wilde, 1998). On the autocratic side the referent is identified through the survival literature — territorial disputes as responses to unpopularity (Tir, 2010), annexation's rally effect (Busmann and Iost, 2024), legitimisation as a pillar of durability (Gerschewski, 2013), Svolik's twin problems of control and power-sharing (Svolik, 2012), the audience costs of retreat (Weiss and Dafoe, 2019) — and confirmed in Russia's own words, where the nuclear shield guards conflicts 'on which their fate depends' (Al Jazeera, 2023). On the democratic side it is stated in the governing documents: the British people and nearly one billion Euro-Atlantic inhabitants, the security of France and the states nearest the threat, the American people, and joint nuclear planning directed at 'ensuring the continued safety and security of the people of the ROK' (White House, 2024b).

Finding 3. Democracies and autocracies use the same tools and the same medium of securitisation — nuclear leverage and territory — while differing in the referent object; the Budapest record converts this conceptual distinction into a behavioural finding. The two sequences: governing elite - territorial revision - nuclear leverage against intervention - regime consolidation; population - territorial integrity - nuclear deterrence against revision - preservation of physical and socioeconomic security, share their middle terms and diverge at the head. This is why neither arsenal size nor declaratory doctrine can distinguish them (Narang, 2014; Sechser and Fuhrmann, 2017), and why Schelling's two modes of the instrument appear on both sides, pointed in opposite territorial directions (Schelling, 1966). The five states that assured Ukraine in December 1994 then supply one object: Russia violated its assurance; China did not act on its own and materially enabled the violator; the three democracies sustained Ukraine's territorial defence under nuclear coercion designed to stop them, with the General Assembly record pointing the same way. The divergence follows institutional expectations (Gaubatz, 1996; Leeds, Mattes and Vogel, 2009) while remaining probabilistic (Gartzke and Gleditsch, 2004; Weeks, 2008). The

methodological consequence stands regardless: declaratory nuclear policy is not a uniform class of evidence across regime types, and China's no-first-use pledge, while evidence, cannot be treated as a sufficient predictor of conduct given its assurance record and unresolved territorial objective.

For non-nuclear states the implication is the study's practical contribution. Ukraine relinquished an inherited arsenal in exchange for assurances, and its experience shows that the value of such assurances depends on the political character and behavioural record of the states providing them (Kulacki, 2022). A non-nuclear state cannot assess a nuclear neighbour by counting warheads or reading doctrine. It must ask what territorial objective the capability serves, whose security that objective ultimately protects, and whether the state advancing it has honoured comparable commitments when doing so became costly.

The wider contribution is therefore not the claim that nuclear weapons can shield aggression, which existing scholarship has established. It is that the same relationship between nuclear leverage and territory can be organised in opposite directions around different referent objects — the autocratic regime in geonuclear expansion, the population in geonuclear protection; that the difference can be read from observable evidence; and that the war in Ukraine is the setting in which both configurations became visible at once — geonuclear expansion executed, and geonuclear protection erected against its repetition.

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