Why would the U.S. military, which has put untold billions of dollars into precision weapons over several decades, need such a blunt and terrifying weapon? To counter small Russian nuclear weapons.

"The Russians ... maintain their tactical nuclear stockpile in ways that we have not," Hix said.

Potomac Institute head Philip Karber, who helped write the Pentagon's Russia New Generation Warfare Study, offered a bit more explanation when *Defense One* spoke to him in January. While the United States retains just a few of its once-large arsenal of tactical nukes, Karber estimates Russia currently has anywhere from 2,000 to 5,000 of the weapons.

"Look at what the Russians have been doing in low-fission, high-fusion, sub-kiloton tactical nuclear technology," he said. "It appears that they are putting a big effort ... in both miniaturizing the warheads and using sub-kiloton low-yield warheads."

Why is that significant? By shrinking the warhead, you can shoot it out of a wider variety of guns, including, potentially, 152-millimeter tank cannons.

"They've announced that the follow-on tank to the Armata will have a 152-millimeter gun missile launcher," Karber said. "They're talking about it having a nuclear capability. And you go, 'You're talking about *building a nuclear tank*, a tank that fires a nuke?' Well, that's the implication."

Hix says the use of tactical battlefield nuclear weapons, even very low-level ones, is not part of official Russian military doctrine, but it is a capability they are increasingly eager to show off (and discuss) to intimidate neighbors and adversaries.

"They certainly exercise the use of those weapons in many of their exercises, including the one that participated in the parking of 30,000 to 40,000 soldiers on the Ukrainian border right before [the 2014 invasion of] Crimea," he said. "That coercive intimidation is a part of their design."

And while even Soviet generals may have shied away from using tactical nukes, Blix said, Putin's military is "a lot more inclined philosophically to see the utility of them."