



Brinkmanship and Nuclear Threat in the Ukraine War

Carl Conetta

Project on Defense Alternatives

31 May 2023

Western brinkmanship in Ukraine depends on denying there is a brink. That's a mistake.

How to assess the risk that Moscow will use nuclear weapons to rescue some part of its “special military operation” in Ukraine? Look to nuclear capability, operational effectiveness, the value of the asset or position Moscow hopes to protect, the likely retaliation it will face or price it will pay for nuclear use, and its ability to defer that price or parry retaliation.

There is no doubt that Russia has the capability to conduct a limited nuclear attack on Ukraine while retaining thousands of additional nuclear weapons, both strategic and tactical, to parry retaliation by third parties. This is a common (albeit delusional) “limited nuclear war” script entertained by both the USA and Russia for decades.[1]

Although a limited nuclear battlefield attack would not knock Ukraine out of the war - even in prospect - the goal of such an attack might be to prompt Brussels and Washington to seek a cease-fire out of fear of a broader war. Moscow's wager would be that this is a more likely Western response than escalation. Moscow would also be betting specifically that the West would not risk the destruction of Washington, Berlin, or Paris in order to punish an attack on a Ukrainian field army. But would Moscow roll these dice?

For what it is worth, Russian nuclear doctrine provides considerable leeway for the use of nuclear weapons.[2] This helps shape the expectations of and planning by state and military security managers. In Russian doctrine, as in Western, there are provisions to “extend” the use of nuclear weapons to circumstances other than meeting a nuclear attack.[3] Over the past year and more, Russian leaders have pointed to Russian doctrine allowing nuclear use to blunt conventional attacks that challenge “the sovereignty and territorial integrity of the state,” put “the existence of the state under threat,” or attack state or military assets essential to nuclear retaliatory capacity.[4]

The threshold for several of these guidelines is unclear. How close and how fast can a NATO-supported Ukrainian offensive come to the Russian border before possibly triggering a response? Also, notably, Russia has laid claim to five Ukrainian oblasts as its own. Does the Russian nuclear umbrella cover these?

Russian doctrine also allows the use of nuclear weapons simply to limit the escalation of military conflict and help ensure its "cessation on conditions acceptable to the Russian Federation." This seems to allow using nuclear weapons in some presumably "extreme" circumstance to prevent catastrophic battlefield defeat, regardless of where it happens. (The United States also extends its "nuclear umbrella" to additionally cover circumstances and places besides nuclear attack on the homeland.)[5]

The real question deciding the credibility of Russian threats concerns Moscow's cost-benefit calculus should it face decisive defeat in Ukraine. What are the repercussions for Moscow's regional and global sway of accepting a decisive defeat in Ukraine and allowing the likely advance of NATO (after decades of sternly inveighing against expansion)? How do these losses compare with the likely costs and risks of nuclear use?

Is there a nuclear brink?

Some observers flatly dismiss the likelihood of Moscow escalating to the nuclear level, arguing that its stakes in the Ukraine war are not great enough to warrant the likely retaliation and certain global censure that would follow. For instance, Steven Pifer, a former US ambassador to Ukraine, writes:[6]

"It makes little sense for the Kremlin to run that risk in a conflict that is not existential. Russia can lose this war - that is, the Ukrainian military could drive the Russians out - and the Russian state will survive. The Ukrainian army will not march on Moscow."

It is dangerous, however, for Westerners to presume to define for Moscow what it sees as an existential threat to the Russian state. Consistent Russian policy statements, investment, and action all suggest that Moscow views the nation's critical interests to substantially exceed the mere survival of the state, writ small.

Pifer's statement might be read as more motivational than predictive, aiming to shape allied opinion - reassure it - and convince Moscow that Westerners intend to "stay the course." In this way, the statement might itself be an act of brinkmanship, evincing a stout willingness to risk an adverse outcome.

That said, it would be a grave error to underestimate or understate Russia's strategic stakes in the war as it and they have evolved. Moscow accepting a dramatic defeat on its border (and presumably acquiescing to the eventual advance of NATO) would signal the eclipse of Russian global power. This expectation is shared by top US leadership.[7] Such a development would likely presage not only the wider advance of NATO - to Moldova and Georgia, for instance - but also the enervation of Moscow's alliances and the eventual destabilization or realignment of its state partners. Russia's political, economic, and military leadership would most likely view this chain of eventualities as undermining essential prerequisites of national power, security, and wealth. Thus the pressure to meet a dramatic challenge with dramatic action is considerable.[8]

Nonetheless, [in a recent study](#), we too concluded that Putin would not likely execute a deadly nuclear attack in response to a decisive Ukrainian military advance.[9]

Moscow's most likely nuclear option

We assess the likelihood of deadly nuclear use to be low not simply because the tactical effect of battlefield nuclear weapons would be unsatisfactory, nor simply because retaliation and censure would follow any such attack. The pivotal reason is that Moscow has a practicable lower-risk alternative option for compelling a cease-fire and a negotiated settlement short of Russia's total defeat.

In the event of a decisive Ukrainian drive toward the Russian border or Crimea, Moscow could move to raise the war readiness of its strategic and tactical nuclear forces to a crisis level, while "reassuring" the West that this move is purely precautionary. The immediate aim would be to provoke a Russia-USA nuclear face-off *short of war*. Less likely but also possible would be a test explosion of a Russian nuclear weapon over Russian territory. (Nuclear demonstration shots accord with Russian doctrine.)

US-NATO would predictably respond to a real and evident spike in Russian nuclear readiness with a comparable increase in nuclear readiness, resulting in a stand-off. This stand-off would be more dangerous than the Cuban Missile Crisis because it would be rooted in a very bloody ongoing war on the border of Russia that involves a third party - Ukraine - not entirely under NATO control.[10] Moscow's aim would be to collapse the NATO consensus for war - a quite plausible outcome, especially in light of French, German, Italian, Greek, and Hungarian sentiment.

A Russian feint toward nuclear use is still remarkably dangerous, of course. As we wrote previously, it is "crisis instability that poses the greatest danger of nuclear cataclysm." [11] Any hair-trigger standoff increases the likelihood of rash, mistaken, or accidental use. During the Cuban crisis there were several close calls. And there have been others in other crises.[12]

We are closer today to a nuclear clash than at any time in the past 60 years. And we will grow closer still if, or when, the two nuclear weapon superpowers raise their war readiness levels. Some US leadership statements about war goals indicate that US brinkmanship is partially driven by the prospect of a dramatic reduction in Russian power and the possible demise of Vladimir Putin.[13] These prospects may also feed misplaced warnings about the dangers of diplomacy and problematic assertions about what Moscow may or may not consider an existential challenge. Both instances of *nuclear danger denial* may serve and evince brinkmanship.

As noted, Russia and the West have previously managed a confrontation similar in important respects to the current one - the 1962 Cuban Missile Crisis[14] - which can help illuminate the options and arguments we entertain today

JFK, McGeorge Bundy, and General Curtis LeMay

Reflecting on the crisis 26 years after the fact, US Pres. Kennedy's national security advisor McGeorge Bundy estimated that the 1962 standoff had involved a 1/100 risk of nuclear war.[15] But how worrisome are those odds, if true? Trying to weigh the likely cost of nuclear war, Bundy thought (at least in retrospect) that the risk was too high to push forward with a more aggressive response to the Soviet placement of nuclear missiles in Cuba. Bundy wrote "In this apocalyptic matter the risk can be very small indeed and still much too large for comfort." [16] Put simply, risk involves the likelihood of an event occurring and the consequences if it does.

In the event, Pres. Kennedy decided to blockade the further transfer of Soviet missiles and seek a diplomatic solution - horse-trading, as it turned out - in order to remove the assets already in place. In this, he rejected the proposal to bomb Cuba put forward by the head of the US Air Force, General Curtis LeMay. Kennedy was worried that the Soviets would retaliate for a strike on Cuba with action in Berlin or elsewhere, and the two nations would climb the escalation ladder. LeMay dismissed this concern by saying that wherever the Soviets might act the USA could best them, and so they would be deterred or defeated. LeMay told Kennedy that the President's alternative - which resolved the crisis with a single US fatality (U-2 pilot Maj. Rudy Anderson) - was "almost as bad as the appeasement at Munich." [17]

This debate still resonates today - Kennedy vs LeMay - but one reality has been papered over, and this occluded variable is essential to setting a wise limit on brinkmanship. As McGeorge Bundy observed, a pivotal consideration in managing nuclear standoffs is (or should be) that even a very limited strategic nuclear exchange "would be a disaster beyond history." [18] If the threat is even marginally credible, then caution is due and diplomacy wise.

Notes

1. Amy F. Woolf, "[Nonstrategic Nuclear Weapons](#)," US Congressional Research Service, Washington DC, 07 Mar 2022. Also see: William A. Chambers, John K. Warden, Caroline R. Milne, and James A. Blackwell, "[An Assessment of the US-Russia Nonstrategic Nuclear Weapons Balance](#)," Institute for Defense Analysis, Jan 2021.

2. Michael Kofman and Anya Loukianova Fink, "[Escalation Management and Nuclear Employment in Russian Military Strategy](#)," *War on the Rocks*, 19 Sep 2022. Also see: Kofman, Fink, and Jeffrey Edmonds, "[Russian Strategy for Escalation Management: Evolution of Key Concepts](#)" (Arlington Virginia: CNA, Apr 2020).

3. Extended nuclear deterrence

- Michael J. Mazarr, "[Understanding Deterrence](#)," RAND Corp Perspective, 2018.
- Shannon Bugos, "[Russia Releases Nuclear Deterrence Policy](#)," *Arms Control Today* (July/August 2020).
- Valeriy Akimenko, "[Russia and strategic non-nuclear deterrence](#)," Chatham House briefing, 29 Jul 2021.
- "[Extend deterrence](#)," *Air Force Doctrine Publication 3-72*, Curtis LeMay Center for Doctrine Development and Education, USAF, 18 Dec 2020.

4. Center for Naval Analysis, translation, "[Foundations of State Policy of the Russian Federation in the Area of Nuclear Deterrence](#)," June 2020.

5. US nuclear doctrine similarly allows globe-spanning nuclear use to protect US assets, critical interests, allies, and partners from a variety of devastating attacks, not just nuclear. However, US policy limits nuclear action only against other nuclear weapon states, non-members of the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT), and NPT member states that Washington may view as in violation of their treaty obligations.

- US Dept of Defense, [2022 National Defense Strategy, Incorporating the Nuclear Posture Review and the Missile Defense Review](#) (Washington DC: 2022).
- "[Extend deterrence](#)," *Air Force Doctrine Publication 3-72*, Curtis LeMay Center for Doctrine Development and Education, USAF, 18 Dec 2020.

6. Steven Pifer, "[Would Putin Roll the Nuclear Dice?](#)" *Time*, 18 Oct 2022

7. US Officials foresee the eclipse of Russian power

- DNI Haines, "[Opening Statement](#)" on the "2023 Annual Threat Assessment of the US Intelligence Community," DNI, 04 Apr 2023.
- "[Russia-Ukraine war: Putin has already lost 'strategically, operationally and tactically' says US general](#)," *The Guardian*, 14 Feb 2023.
- "[Russia Suffers 'Catastrophic Strategic Disaster' in Ukraine](#)," *DOD News*, 09 Nov 2022

8. Russian voices urging use of nuclear weapons

- ["Russian Radio Host Pressures Putin to Change View of Nuclear Weapon,"](#) *Reuters*, 10 May 2023.
- ["Kadyrov says Russia should use low-yield nuclear weapon,"](#) *CNBC*, 1 Oct 2022.
- ["'Only one option': Pro-Russian commander urges nuclear war with NATO as Ukraine regains ground,"](#) *AlterNet.com*, 14 Dec 2022.

9. Carl Conetta, ["Tempting Armageddon: The Likelihood of Russian Nuclear Use is Misconstrued in Western Policy,"](#) Project on Defense Alternatives Policy Report, 02 Feb 2023.

10. National Security Archive, ["Cuban Missile Crisis at 60,"](#) accessed 01 Jan 2023. Also see: Avalon Project, ["The Cuban Missile Crisis,"](#) Yale Lillian Goldman Library, accessed 01 Jan 2023.

11. op cit, Conetta, "Tempting Armageddon." Subsection: "Crisis Instability: The Certain Danger"

12. There have been dozens of nuclear weapon-related accidents since the 1945 as well as a handful of publicly-known incidents of mistaken near-use due to faulty perception of attack. A high percentage of these false warnings occurred during conflict crises - in 1956 during the Suez Crisis, 1973 during the Arab-Israeli October War, and most critically during the Cuban Missile Crisis when a Soviet submarine nearly launched a nuclear torpedo, US radar operators separately mistakenly reported to the US air defense command that a missile attack was underway, and a US F-102 fighter armed only with nuclear air-to-air missiles rushed to protect a U-2 that had wandered into Soviet air space. It should not be surprising that mistaken perceptions or rash action cluster around crisis periods.

Patricia Lewis, Heather Williams, Benoît Pelopidas, and Sasan Aghlani, ["Too Close for Comfort: Cases of Near Nuclear Use and Options for Policy,"](#) Chatham House Report, April 2014.

13. US objectives

- ["Biden adviser embraces effort to weaken Russia and make example of Putin,"](#) *Washington Examiner*, 22 July 2022.
- ["US war aims shift in Ukraine - and bring additional risks,"](#) *NPR*, 27 Apr 2022.
- ["The US has a big new goal in Ukraine: Weaken Russia,"](#) *Washington Post*, 26 Apr 2022.
- ["Pentagon chief says US wants to see Russia '~weakened',"](#) *The Hill*, 25 Apr 2022.
- ["Biden contradicts aides and reaffirms his call for Putin's overthrow,"](#) *NY Post*, 28 Mar 2022.
- ["Biden: 'For God's sake, this man cannot remain in power',"](#) *AP* 26 Mar 2022.

14. See ft. 10

15. McGeorge Bundy, *Danger and Survival: Choices About the Bomb in the First Fifty Years* (New York: Random House, 1988); Graham Allison, ["The Cuban Missile Crisis at 60: Six Timeless Lessons for Arms Control,"](#) *Arms Control Today* (October 2022).

16. McGeorge Bundy, *Danger and Survival: Choices About the Bomb in the First Fifty Years* (New York: Random House, 1988) p 461

17. Gen. Curtis LeMay, "[This is Almost as Bad as the Appeasement at Munich](#)," transcript and recording, "The Fourteenth Day," accessed 10 Jan 2023.

18. McGeorge Bundy, "[To Cap the Volcano](#)," *Foreign Affairs* 48, no. 1 (October 1969).



© Copyright 2023 by Project on Defense Alternatives. All rights reserved. Material herein may be quoted without permission, with credit to PDA.

Project on Defense Alternatives - Cambridge MA & Washington, DC 20036 - Email: pda@comw.org