



“Nuclear Blackmail” – Misdirection in the Ukraine War Debate

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Moscow’s repeated warnings about possible world war and nuclear conflict in response to Western support for Ukraine’s fighting forces have elicited calls in the West to resist “nuclear blackmail.”[1] Some observers go further to claim that moderating Western policy in light of nuclear dangers would actually increase the likelihood of nuclear war, if not now then in the future.[2] Prof Timothy Snyder (Yale University) advances the argument succinctly. He writes:

“All of you who are saying that we have to give in to [Russian] nuclear blackmail are making nuclear war more likely. Please stop. When you give in to it, you empower dictators to do it again, encourage worldwide nuclear proliferation, and make nuclear war much, much more likely.”[3]

The stratagem of this argument is to turn concern about nuclear war against itself; To see the concern itself as the problem. This is wrong headed. There are a variety of effective and sensible ways to inhibit nuclear weapons proliferation, but categorically daring nuclear threats made by nuclear weapon superpowers fighting wars on their borders is not one of them.

What to do in light of nuclear threats depends on assessments of threat capability, threat credibility, the value of what is at risk, and capacities for retaliation on all sides. Based on these factors, we might figure a rough likelihood of nuclear use, which weighs against any potential conventional gain or loss. How to respond admits a wide range of options, not just a binary choice between capitulation and absolute victory.

About the Russia-Ukraine war one thing is sure: Regardless of outcome at this point, it hardly stands as a positive advertisement for aggression or for Russian power generally.

Now, turning to the specific problem of nuclear-weapon proliferation:

The principle impetus for non-nuclear nations to pursue nuclear weapons is contention with existing nuclear weapon states or with adversaries who possess overwhelming conventional military superiority. These concerns seem sufficient to outweigh any doubts about the efficacy of nuclear deterrent threats. Reinforcing the pursuit of these weapons is the fact that both Washington and Moscow have long embraced and advocated strategies of extended nuclear deterrence – which amount in part to using nuclear threats to putatively stem non-nuclear ones.[4]

Thankfully, it's a steep climb to nuclear weapon capability – dangerous, costly, and technically challenging. The most reliable way to inhibit the transfer of proscribed material and technology is close cooperation among all major nuclear-weapon states in non- and counter-proliferation efforts. In this light, it is worrisome that relations among the nuclear-weapon superpowers have become so badly frayed.

“Nuclear Blackmail”

The term “nuclear blackmail” has often been employed to introduce the idea of using nuclear weapons in coercive bargaining.[5] It allows a quick study because common blackmail is a well-known and understood form of coercion. In 2021, there were more than 12,000 US cases of blackmail and extortion recorded in the FBI crime database.[6] It is frequent because the number of potential perpetrators is enormous and the cost of entry into the practice is low. Indeed, most humans have probably already engaged in some coercive bargaining – and quite specifically, blackmail – by the time they reach adulthood. However, despite the utility of using the term “blackmail” to describe “nuclear coercion,” it can also confound policy-making if done without qualification.

The ease of entry into the practice of common blackmail sets it apart from nuclear coercion because, as noted above, the cost of entry into the club of nuclear-weapon states is very high. Also distinct is the relative ease by which a common blackmailer might remain anonymous and, thus, less vulnerable to interdiction or retaliation. Nation states, by contrast, cannot hide in the shadows when leveling nuclear threats. While common “blackmail” is a relatively low-cost, low-visibility, low-risk endeavor, nuclear coercion is none of these things. Although the dynamics of bargaining are similar for all forms of coercion, the limits and frequency of various types is not. As always, analogy cannot substitute for analysis. And in the case of nuclear threats, the “blackmail” analogy limits our ability to manage them; it does this by distorting the risk calculus, by exaggerating the downside risk of negotiated settlement.

No matter how the Russia-Ukraine war resolves, the resolution will not alter the factors that limit capacities for nuclear acquisition and coercion. More pointedly, moderation of Ukrainian and US-NATO objectives in the war for the sake of reducing nuclear risks would not prompt a rash of proliferation. Nor will it prompt an epidemic of nuclear coercion. Visibility, counter-proliferation efforts, and the high cost of acquiring, holding, and using nuclear weapons will always weigh against proliferation. Capability, credibility, and vulnerability to retaliation will always serve as limiting factors to nuclear coercion.

Notes

1. A selection of Russian nuclear threats related to the Ukraine war

- [“Putin reminds everyone that Ukraine joining NATO could lead to nuclear war,”](#) Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists, 11 Feb 2022.
- [“Russia ready to defend itself with any weapon, including nuclear – Medvedev,”](#) Tass, 22 Feb 2022.
- [“‘No other option’: Excerpts of Putin’s speech declaring war,”](#) Al Jazeera, 24 Feb 2022.
- [“Putin waves nuclear sword in confrontation with the West,”](#) AP, 25 Feb 2022.
- [“Russian strategic deterrence forces go on enhanced combat alert – top brass,”](#) Tass, 28 Feb 2022.
- [“Russia’s Lavrov: A third world war would be nuclear, destructive,”](#) Al Jazeera, 02 March 2022.
- [“Putin’s spokesman Dmitry Peskov on Ukraine and the West: ‘Don’t push us into the corner’,”](#) PBS News, 28 Mar 2022.
- [“Russia’s Lavrov: Do not underestimate threat of nuclear war,”](#) Reuters, 25 Apr 2022.
- [“Angry Putin wields energy, nuclear threats against West,”](#) Washington Times, 27 Apr 2022.
- [“Russia’s Medvedev: new regions can be defended with strategic nuclear weapons,”](#) Reuters, 22 Sep 2022.
- [“Medvedev raises spectre of Russian nuclear strike on Ukraine,”](#) Reuters, 27 Sep 2022.
- [“Russian military leaders’ talk of nuclear attack rattles US calculus,”](#) Washington Post, 02 Nov 2022.
- [“The threat of nuclear war is rising, says Vladimir Putin,”](#) MSN, 8 Dec 2022.
- [“‘Only one option’: Pro-Russian commander urges nuclear war with NATO as Ukraine regains ground,”](#) AlterNet.com, 14 Dec 2022.
- [“Putin loyalist dials up nuclear rhetoric as NATO partners push for more weapons for Ukraine,”](#) CNN, 19 Jan 2023.
- [“Russian State Duma Head Joins Officials Warning Of Nuclear Retaliation In Ukraine,”](#) RFE/RL, 22 Jan 2023.
- [“Russia signs deal to deploy tactical nuclear weapons in Belarus,”](#) AP, 25 May 2023.
- [“Russia’s Medvedev Threatens Ukraine With Pre-Emptive Nuclear Strike,”](#) Newsweek, 26 May 2023.

2. Max Boot, [“Giving in to Putin’s nuclear blackmail would be a geopolitical disaster,”](#) Washington Post, 11 Oct 2022. Also see: Andriy Zagorodnyuk, [“Bowing to Putin’s nuclear blackmail will make nuclear war more likely,”](#) The Atlantic Council blog, 18 Oct 2022.

3. Timothy Snyder, [“All of you who are saying that we have to give in to nuclear blackmail are making nuclear war more likely,”](#) Twitter, 14 Oct 2022.

4. On Extended Deterrence

- Michael J. Mazarr, [“Understanding Deterrence”](#) (PDF), 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](#)" (PDF), *Air Force Doctrine Publication 3-72*, Curtis LeMay Center for Doctrine Development and Education, USAF, 18 Dec 2020.

5. On Blackmail and "Nuclear Blackmail"

- Daniel Ellsberg, "[The Theory and Practice of Blackmail](#)," RAND Paper, RAND Corporation, 1968. <https://www.rand.org/pubs/papers/P3883.html>
- Thomas Schelling, *Arms and Influence* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1966), Chap 1, "The Diplomacy of Violence."
- Richard K. Betts, *Nuclear Blackmail and Nuclear Balance* (Washington DC: Brookings Institution, 1 July 1987)

6. Federal Bureau of Investigation, "[Crime Data Explorer](#)," accessed: 27 May 2023.



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