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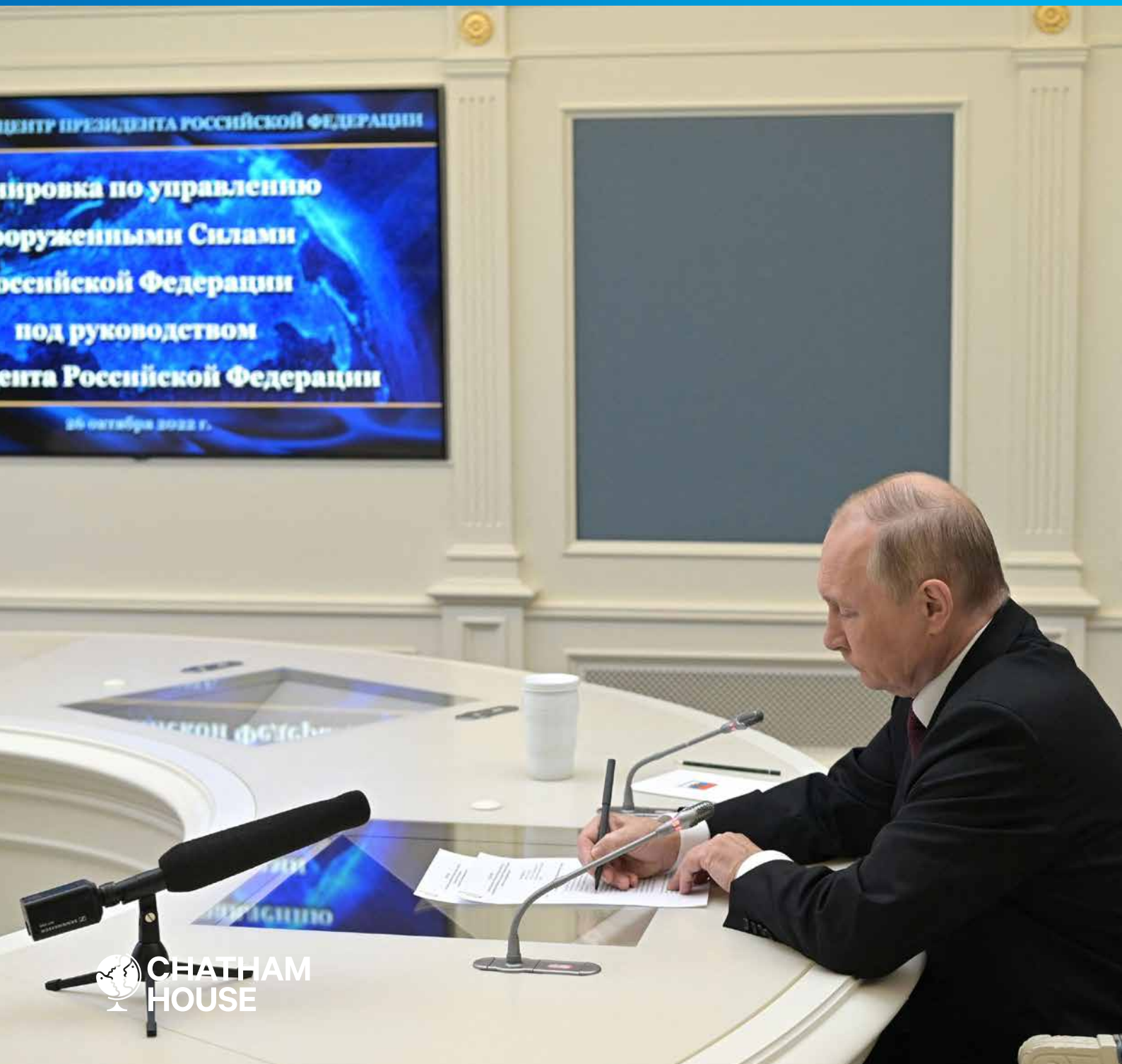
Russia and Eurasia
Programme

March 2023

Russian nuclear intimidation

How Russia uses nuclear
threats to shape Western
responses to aggression

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Summary

- Russia has achieved substantial success in constraining Western support for Ukraine through use of threatening language around the possible use of nuclear weapons. Western leaders have explicitly justified reluctance to provide essential military assistance to Ukraine by reference to Russian narratives of uncontrollable escalation.
- Purveyors of Russian nuclear rhetoric, including President Vladimir Putin, toned down their threatening language significantly in the last few months of 2022 and into 2023. Nevertheless, Moscow's prior long-running campaign of nuclear intimidation continues to deliver results in terms of deterring Western responses to Russian aggression, and shielding Russia from the consequences of its actions in Ukraine.
- This represents a striking success for Russian information campaigns. That success results from consistent failure among Western audiences and decision-makers to consider how unrealistic Russia's threats are, or measure them against its real – and unchanged – nuclear posture. It is essential for responses to Russia's intimidatory rhetoric to be guided by a realistic assessment of its basis in reality, rather than by fear-induced paralysis.
- Actual use of nuclear weapons by Russia remains not impossible but highly unlikely. A decision to launch a strike would have to overcome a range of systemic and practical obstacles. Regardless of Western responses, the global consequences of breaking the nuclear taboo would be severe for Russia.
- Nevertheless, Western nuclear powers have given Moscow grounds for confidence that there would not be retaliation in kind. US and allied messaging to Russia does not currently convey sufficient determination to respond adequately to nuclear use, and so should be urgently revised to achieve appropriate deterrent effect.

Introduction and context

Russian nuclear intent is communicated through two very distinct means: publicly stated doctrine; and rhetoric, propaganda and threats. Most of the alarmed commentary in the West on the likelihood of nuclear use by Russia has been driven more by rhetoric – threats routinely made by Russian leadership figures and amplified by propagandists, most notably on state television – than by doctrine (what the Russian armed forces themselves think nuclear weapons can be used for, or indeed be useful for). This has had the effect of distorting discussion in the public domain of the problem of possible nuclear use by Russia, including by political leaders in the West.¹

Even experienced commentators on nuclear issues have at times been swayed by the rhetoric, coming to believe that each new threat may mean an actual change in Russian nuclear policy.² In one typical example, in a televised address on 21 September 2022, President Vladimir Putin claimed senior NATO officials had stated nuclear weapons could be used against Russia, and continued:

I would like to remind those who make such statements that our country has different types of weapons as well, and some of them are more modern than the weapons NATO countries have. In the event of a threat to the territorial integrity of our country and to defend Russia and our people, we will certainly make use of all weapon systems available to us. This is not a bluff.³

Putin's words were widely interpreted, among Western audiences, as a new and escalatory direct threat of nuclear use, triggering a wave of alarmed commentary.⁴ But a more sober assessment indicated that what the Russian president was saying was neither escalatory nor new. In fact, rather than being a new challenge, the specific scenario he was referring to had been anticipated by analysts some months earlier, in May 2022.⁵ Similarly, in a television interview in late March 2023, Putin mentioned implementation dates for long-established plans for building infrastructure to host Russian tactical nuclear weapons in Belarus. Western media immediately seized on this as a new and dangerous escalation in response to recently announced UK plans (noted later in this paper) to supply Ukraine with anti-tank rounds containing depleted uranium cores.⁶

The risk of over-reaction in coverage of Russian nuclear threats appears particularly pronounced if commentators are relatively new to the Russian problem set, and so may not fully account for the essential context that threatening language

¹ Akimenko, V. (2022), 'Myth 6: 'Russia's nuclear threats are real and should be taken literally'', 23 August 2022, in Giles, K. et al. (2022), 'Myths and misconceptions around Russian military intent', Chatham House, 14 July 2022 (original article series), <https://www.chathamhouse.org/2022/07/myths-and-misconceptions-around-russian-military-intent/myth-6-russias-nuclear-threats-are>.

² For a discussion of the risks associated with the ambiguity in Putin's messaging, see Cournoyer, J. and Messmer, M. (2022), 'Ambiguous nuclear threats heighten catastrophic risks', Chatham House Expert Comment, 22 September 2022, <https://www.chathamhouse.org/2022/09/ambiguous-nuclear-threats-heighten-catastrophic-risks>.

³ President of Russia (2022), 'Address by the President of the Russian Federation', 21 September 2022, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/69390>.

⁴ See, for example, Sauer, P. (2022), 'Putin announces partial mobilisation and threatens nuclear retaliation in escalation of Ukraine war', *Guardian*, 21 September 2022, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/sep/21/putin-announces-partial-mobilisation-in-russia-in-escalation-of-ukraine-war>.

⁵ Lawlor, K. and Clark, M. (2022), 'Russian Annexation of Occupied Ukraine Is Putin's Unacceptable "Off-Ramp"', Institute for the Study of War, 13 May 2022, <https://www.understandingwar.org/backgrounder/russian-annexation-occupied-ukraine-putin%E2%80%99s-unacceptable-%E2%80%9C-ramp%E2%80%9D>.

⁶ AP (2023), 'Putin says Russia will station tactical nukes in Belarus', 25 March 2023, <https://apnews.com/article/russia-belarus-nuclear-weapons-2d9584534da25c00c56dbf7b14694e0e>.

around nuclear use is an inescapable background noise from Russia that long predates its war on Ukraine.⁷ Similar threats were heard, for example, when Boris Yeltsin was president, during a period when Russia's relations with the US were broadly considered to be much better.⁸

In reality, the 'nuclear card' is routinely in play throughout Russian concepts of crisis and war management, and of international relations more broadly. As Dima Adamsky, a leading expert on Russian strategic thinking, put it in 2015, reference to nuclear weapons forms an integral part of a toolkit that is drawn on 'to manipulate the adversary's perception, to maneuver its decision-making process, and to influence its strategic behavior' without actually going to war.⁹ However, this understanding has been largely overlooked in the Western response to intimidation by Putin, along with broader principles of deterrence whereby '[a] particularly unscrupulous actor may intend to create a risk of nuclear escalation, or a perception of such a risk, and use it to its advantage, but the realization of the risk is not intended.'¹⁰

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In the six months following Russia's February 2022 invasion of Ukraine, these factors combined to cause an unprecedentedly intense barrage of threatening nuclear language involving all elements of Russia's information warfare apparatus – from President Putin, down through public diplomacy and state media commentators and propagandists, to agents of influence abroad and Russia's 'troll armies' on social media. It was in this context that the first version of this paper, considering the likelihood that these nuclear threats might become reality, was drawn up for US European Command's Russia Strategic Initiative (with whose kind permission it has now been updated for public release).

The situation has evolved substantially between mid-2022 and the completion of the current version of the paper, in March 2023. As detailed in the next section, nuclear threats formed an unarguably successful stratagem for Russia throughout the spring and summer of 2022. But these threats became less plausible with repetition. The same applied to more generic intimidatory language from Russia, as when, in mid-September 2022, Moscow's ambassador to Washington, Anatoliy Antonov,

⁷ Blank, S. (2022) *Russian Nuclear Strategy In the Ukraine War: An Interim Report*, National Institute for Public Policy Information Series, Fairfax, VA: National Institute Press, <https://nipp.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/06/IS-525.pdf>.

⁸ Gittings, J. (1999), 'Yeltsin gives US nuclear warning', *Guardian*, 10 December 1999, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/1999/dec/10/russia.chechnya>.

⁹ Adamsky, D. (2015), *Cross-Domain Coercion: The Current Russian Art of Strategy*, IFRI Proliferation Papers 54, Paris: Institut français des relations internationales, <https://www.ifri.org/sites/default/files/atoms/files/pp54adamsky.pdf>.

¹⁰ Lavikainen, J. (2023), *Nuclear deterrence in the Ukraine war: Diplomacy of violence*, FIIA Briefing Paper 355, Helsinki: Finnish Institute of International Affairs, <https://www.fia.fi/en/publication/nuclear-deterrence-in-the-ukraine-war>.

warned that supplying Ukraine with ATACMS missiles would mean the US ‘may get involved in a military conflict with Russia’.¹¹ As reactions in the West to statements of this kind evolved from alarm to something more like derision, there was palpable frustration among those delivering the Kremlin’s messages that threat inflation meant each repetition had progressively less effect.¹² This was evident when, in Putin’s televised address of 21 September, having pointed to the possible use of nuclear weapons, he added: ‘This is not a bluff.’¹³ The effect was to reduce the credibility of what he was saying: a substantial proportion of subsequent Western analysis included the observation that the only people who need to say that something is not a bluff are habitual bluffers.

This may be one of the reasons for a marked diminuendo in Russian nuclear threat language in the last few months of 2022. The German Institute for Security and International Affairs (SWP), in a detailed chronology of nuclear messaging between Russia and the West, notes a de-escalatory trend starting in July–August 2022.¹⁴ The final months of the year saw a more pronounced rolling back of nuclear rhetoric from Russian official sources, including – with occasional exceptions like his 21 September address – Putin himself.¹⁵ By the spring of 2023, Putin’s language of threat was subdued, and appeared to follow a familiar routine of a vague promise of unspecified consequences for each new element of Western support for Ukraine. In March, he responded to reports that the UK would supply the Ukrainian military with armour-piercing shells containing depleted uranium by stating, once again, that ‘Russia will be forced to respond in an appropriate manner’.¹⁶

It has been plausibly argued that the easing of nuclear threats by Russia also followed firm messages from China in public and private that this kind of loose talk was undesirable.¹⁷ This argument was supported by language used in China’s ‘Position on the Political Settlement of the Ukraine Crisis’, released on 24 February 2023, that included explicit criticism of nuclear threats.¹⁸

¹¹ NEXTA (@nexta_tv) via Twitter (2022), ‘If the USA supplies Ukraine with ATACMS ballistic missiles with a range of up to 300 km, Washington may get involved in a military conflict with Russia, said Ambassador to the US Anatoly Antonov’, 15 September 2022, https://twitter.com/nexta_tv/status/1570315221478133761.

¹² Trenin, D. (2022), ‘Верните страх!’ [Bring back fear!], *Russia in Global Affairs*, 26 September 2022, <https://globalaffairs.ru/articles/vernite-strah>.

¹³ President of Russia (2022), ‘Address by the President of the Russian Federation’, 21 September 2022.

¹⁴ Arndt, A. C. and Horowitz, L. (2022), *Nuclear rhetoric and escalation management in Russia’s war against Ukraine: A Chronology*, SWP Working Paper, Berlin: Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik, https://www.swp-berlin.org/publications/products/arbeitspapiere/Arndt-Horowitz_Working-Paper_Nuclear_rhetoric_and_escalation_management_in_Russia_s_war_against_Ukraine.pdf.

¹⁵ Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation (2022), ‘Заявление Российской Федерации о предотвращении ядерной войны’ [Statement of the Russian Federation on Prevention of Nuclear War], 2 November 2022, https://www.mid.ru/ru/foreign_policy/news/1836575; Valdai Discussion Club (2022), ‘Vladimir Putin Meets with Members of the Valdai Discussion Club. Transcript of the Plenary Session of the 19th Annual Meeting’, 27 October 2022, <https://valdaiclub.com/events/posts/articles/vladimir-putin-meets-with-members-of-the-valdai-club>.

¹⁶ *Izvestiya* (2023), ‘Путин ответил на планы Великобритании поставить Киеву снаряды с обедненным ураном’ [Putin responds to British plan to supply Kyiv with depleted uranium shells], 21 March 2023, <https://iz.ru/1486529/2023-03-21/putin-otvetil-na-plany-velikobritanii-postavit-kievu-snaryady-s-obedennym-uranom>. See also Gozzi, L. (2023), ‘Ukraine war: UK defends sending depleted uranium shells after Putin warning’, BBC News, 22 March 2023, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-europe-65032671>.

¹⁷ Feng, J. (2022), ‘Biden and Xi Agree Nuclear Weapons Use in Ukraine “Totally Unacceptable”’, *Newsweek*, 14 November 2022, <https://www.newsweek.com/joe-biden-xi-jinping-nuclear-weapons-ukraine-unacceptable-1759301>; PBS Newshour (2022), ‘CIA Director Bill Burns on war in Ukraine, intelligence challenges posed by China’, 16 December 2022, <https://www.pbs.org/newshour/show/cia-director-bill-burns-on-war-in-ukraine-intelligence-challenges-posed-by-china>.

¹⁸ Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People’s Republic of China (2023), ‘China’s Position on the Political Settlement of the Ukraine Crisis’, 24 February 2023, https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/zxxx_662805/202302/t20230224_11030713.html.

But a de-escalation in nuclear threats from the latter part of 2022 may also have resulted from a realization in Moscow that the rhetoric was bringing diminishing returns – and not just through overuse. The credibility of Russia’s threats could also be measured against the reality of events on the ground, which consistently failed to trigger the threatened consequences. As observed in a paper published by Estonia’s ministry of defence in early February 2023:

[W]e have repeatedly witnessed that Russia considers conventional retreat acceptable and that nuclear rhetoric can also be muted with firm strategic messaging. Even the attacks against Russia’s strategic capabilities in its strategic depth only triggered a tactical response against Ukraine.¹⁹

This dawning realization contributed to a greater willingness in the West to recognize the gap between Russian rhetoric and intent. Also in early February, the headline of an article published in the *New York Times* stated that fears of Russian nuclear weapons use ‘have diminished’. The article quoted unnamed ‘administration officials’ describing a more sober and balanced approach to threatening language from Russia, in phrases that were strikingly similar to key passages in the earlier version of this paper.²⁰

Where more alarmist reports of Russia’s threats still feature in English-language media, these are by now amplified primarily by established pro-Russia voices and media outlets;²¹ or are repeated without caveat to support arguments in favour of withdrawing support for Ukraine and instead putting pressure on Kyiv to accept defeat, in the form of Russian control of Ukrainian territory, in order to end the war.²²

Success through nuclear threats

Nevertheless, the US administration’s search for Russia’s ‘red lines’ – and the assumption that these red lines exist – continues at the time of writing.²³ This is because a focus on Russian nuclear intimidation instead of on sober analysis of the actual likelihood of nuclear use has already contributed to substantial success for Russia in shaping the behaviour of the US and its Western allies. Threatening language from senior Russian leaders and from Russia’s state media during 2022 built on a long-established and intensive programme of messaging via propagandists and influencers to inculcate in Western audiences the assumption that nuclear use is likely if Russia is obstructed or offended, and that

¹⁹ Republic of Estonia Ministry of Defence (2023), *Russia’s War in Ukraine: Myths and Lessons*, Discussion Paper, <https://kaitseministeerium.ee/en/mythsandlessons>.

²⁰ Barnes, J. E. and Sanger, D. E. (2023), ‘Fears of Russian Nuclear Weapons Use Have Diminished, but Could Re-emerge’, *New York Times*, 3 February 2023, <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/02/03/us/politics/russia-nuclear-weapons.html>.

²¹ Campbell, D. (2023), ‘Russia & the US Press: The Article the CJR Didn’t Publish’, *Byline Times*, 4 February 2023, <https://bylinetimes.com/2023/02/04/russia-and-the-us-press-the-article-the-cjr-didnt-publish>. See also Carl Conetta, C. (2023), *Tempting Armageddon: The Likelihood of Russian Nuclear Use is Misconstrued in Western Policy*, Cambridge, MA: Project on Defense Alternatives, <https://comw.org/pda/tempting-armageddon>.

²² Charap, S. and Priebe, M. (2023), *Avoiding a Long War: U.S. Policy and the Trajectory of the Russia-Ukraine Conflict*, RAND Corporation, <https://www.rand.org/pubs/perspectives/PEA2510-1.html>; Shapiro, J. (2022), ‘We Are on a Path to Nuclear War’, *War on the Rocks*, 12 October 2022, <https://warontherocks.com/2022/10/the-end-of-the-world-is-nigh>.

²³ Barnes, J. (2023), ‘Antony Blinken ‘warns Ukraine’ against retaking Crimea’, *Telegraph*, 16 February 2023, <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/world-news/2023/02/16/ukraine-warned-against-attempting-retake-crimea-putin>.

‘miscalculation’ between Russia and a NATO member state would inescapably escalate to full-scale conflict including nuclear exchanges.²⁴ Tireless repetition of the mantra that any one of a wide range of events that Russia would dislike would ensure ‘guaranteed escalation to the Third World War’ had its intended effect;²⁵ and the assessment of nuclear use as credible in turn constrained Western policy in opposition to Russia.

This assessment has been widespread across Western media, which unintentionally fulfils a key function in disseminating and amplifying Russia’s messaging. But this function is reinforced by those Western politicians and senior officials who also respond to Russian nuclear threats in precisely the manner Moscow would wish them to. This repeating and implicit validation of Russia’s messages is not restricted to Europe: as Kristin Ven Bruusgaard, the director of the Norwegian Intelligence School, observes, even the US ‘has repeatedly warned that a flustered Russia may actually be willing to use nuclear weapons’.²⁶

The preconception that nuclear use by Russia is not only possible but probable if Russia is challenged or threatened, let alone defeated or ‘humiliated’, has been deliberately fostered by long-term Russian propaganda efforts.

In this way, the preconception that nuclear use by Russia is not only possible but probable if Russia is challenged or threatened, let alone defeated or ‘humiliated’, has been deliberately fostered by long-term Russian propaganda efforts. This has led in the West to interpretations of the evidence for and against this probability that are alarmist rather than objective. Reports in November 2022 that Russia’s military leadership had discussed use of nuclear weapons in Ukraine have been widely cited as being highly concerning. In fact, they should cause no additional concern, and should even provide a measure of reassurance; the option has indeed been discussed and, as expected, rejected – as evidenced by the fact that nuclear weapons have not been used.²⁷ Threats by Russia to use Sarmat and Poseidon weapons systems have been widely reported, without the crucial qualifier that they were plainly implausible because these systems were not yet in service. Previously, just days after the start of the February 2022 invasion, Putin announced that Russia’s nuclear forces had been placed on a ‘special mode of combat duty’.²⁸ The phrase was not

²⁴ As detailed in Giles, K. (2021), *What deters Russia: Enduring principles for responding to Moscow*, Research Paper, London: Royal Institute of International Affairs, <https://www.chathamhouse.org/2021/09/what-deters-russia>.

²⁵ European Pravda (2022), ‘Russia Claims that Ukraine’s Admission to NATO May Lead to WWII’, 13 October 2022, <https://www.eurointegration.com.ua/eng/news/2022/10/13/7148604>.

²⁶ Ven Bruusgaard, K. (2023), ‘How Russia Decides to Go Nuclear: Deciphering the Way Moscow Handles Its Ultimate Weapon’, *Foreign Affairs*, 6 February 2023, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/ukraine/how-russia-decides-go-nuclear>.

²⁷ Cooper, H., Barnes, J. E. and Schmitt, E. (2022), ‘Russian Military Leaders Discussed Use of Nuclear Weapons, U.S. Officials Say’, *New York Times*, 2 November 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/11/02/us/politics/russia-ukraine-nuclear-weapons.html>.

²⁸ Luxmoore, M. (2022), ‘Putin Puts Nuclear Forces in a ‘Special Mode of Combat Duty’’, *Wall Street Journal*, 27 February 2022, <https://www.wsj.com/livecoverage/russia-ukraine-latest-news-2022-02-26/card/putin-puts-nuclear-forces-in-a-special-mode-of-combat-duty--WKMRkTauWFnWy26hZar>.

one recognized by Russian or foreign experts on those forces, leading to later assessments that it was quite possibly meaningless. US officials have consistently observed that Russia's public bombast has not at any point been supported by evidence of plans to actually use nuclear weapons, or of any change in Russia's actual nuclear posture.²⁹ Nevertheless, as with other empty phrases such as the 'NATO infrastructure' that Moscow claimed for decades was 'approaching Russia', the lack of substance did not prevent the statement gaining traction in the West. A year later, it was being repeated as fact in authoritative analysis that Putin had placed his country's strategic nuclear weapons on 'high alert' at the start of the war – accompanied by continuing speculation on what this may have meant in practice.³⁰

The challenge for Western media is clear; weighing the arguments for reporting Russian statements against the recognition that, by doing so, those media are allowing themselves to be used as a tool by Russia. The choice a given media outlet makes has direct impact. In one recent study, using the example of threats by Russia's deputy foreign minister Sergei Ryabkov, Jyri Lavikainen of the Finnish Institute of International Affairs has demonstrated that when Russian propaganda is ignored by Western media, the messaging has no impact.³¹

The clearest example of the effects of this long-term Russian campaign has been successful deterrence of Ukraine's Western backers, including the US, from providing war-winning military support. Western powers have been consistently careful not to give the Ukrainian armed forces weapons that could threaten Russia. Assistance has been carefully calibrated, with Ukraine's allies feeling for Russia's red lines and proceeding only once it has become clear that these are fictitious. Russian threats of escalation have repeatedly been explicitly referred to by German chancellor Olaf Scholz as a rationale for impeding or constraining support for Ukraine, on the grounds that Scholz wishes to 'do everything to avoid an escalation that could lead to World War III – there can be no nuclear war'.³² Successful deterrence, and the associated fear of a situation where Russia suffers a defeat, also continues to lead to arguments for a ceasefire in Ukraine as a preferable outcome to a Ukrainian victory.³³

In other words, the West's repeated emphasis of its fear of escalation proves to Russia that threats work, irrespective of how implausible they may be or how often they have been shown to be empty. Regardless of the intensity with which they are currently being delivered, Russia's nuclear threats continue to have

²⁹ The White House (2023), 'Press Briefing by Press Secretary Karine Jean-Pierre and National Security Council Coordinator for Strategic Communications John Kirby', 25 January 2023, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/press-briefings/2023/01/25/press-briefing-by-press-secretary-karine-jean-pierre-and-national-security-council-coordinator-for-strategic-communications-john-kirby-5>; PBS Newshour (2022), 'CIA Director Bill Burns on war in Ukraine, intelligence challenges posed by China', <https://www.pbs.org/newshour/show/cia-director-bill-burns-on-war-in-ukraine-intelligence-challenges-posed-by-china>.

³⁰ For a discussion, see Coles, S. et al. (2023), 'Seven ways Russia's war on Ukraine has changed the world', Chatham House Feature, 17 February 2023, <https://www.chathamhouse.org/2023/02/seven-ways-russias-war-ukraine-has-changed-world>.

³¹ Lavikainen (2023), *Nuclear deterrence in the Ukraine war*.

³² Nienaber, M. (2022), 'Germany's Scholz Focuses Ukraine Policy on Avoiding Nuclear War', Bloomberg, 22 April 2022, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2022-04-22/scholz-warns-of-nuclear-war-with-russia-over-ukraine-conflict>.

³³ Chivvis, C. S. (2022), 'Yes, Putin might use nuclear weapons. We need to plan for scenarios where he does', *Guardian*, 23 September 2022, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2022/sep/23/yes-putin-might-use-nuclear-weapons-we-need-to-plan-for-scenarios-where-he-does>.

their desired effect for as long as Western leaders like Scholz or US president Joe Biden continue to state clearly that they are effective in preventing Ukraine being provided with the military support that it needs to win the war, and even in preventing them from offering Ukraine unqualified support in evicting Russian forces from the whole of Ukrainian sovereign territory.³⁴

Objectives

Despite the lack of any indication that Russia is genuinely considering use of nuclear weapons, it is of course important to consider circumstances under which its plans may change in the future. If Putin decides that threats are not sufficient to achieve his objectives and he in fact wishes to order a genuine nuclear strike, it is reasonable to assume that he will be presented with a range of options for doing so by his military commanders, and that these options will include an assessment of the likely outcomes – including what the strike would actually achieve. In other words, conditions for using a nuclear weapon would include an assessment by the Russian military that doing so will meet one or more specific objectives. This section therefore considers the various benefits that Putin, or those advising him, could perceive in nuclear use, in order to assess the conditions under which the threat of an actual nuclear strike could become more probable.

‘Victory’

The necessity for Russia to maintain a narrative of victory in Ukraine, despite the reality of military reverses, could in itself provide a stimulus for nuclear use.³⁵ A nuclear strike could be ordered if there is no longer any possibility of claiming conventional victory and a powerful destructive attack on Ukraine is perceived as the only means of avoiding admission of a clear defeat.

This likelihood has been undermined by Russia’s continuing willingness and ability to redefine at will its declared war aims. These have shifted over time from ‘denazification’ and regime change in Kyiv to far more limited goals. Throughout, the definition of ‘victory’ has been sufficiently malleable and ambiguous that even the total withdrawal of Russian forces from Ukrainian territory could be presented as ‘mission accomplished’ if desired. For the Kremlin, it is essential to project that it is in control and has a plan. In conditions of close control of the domestic information space, the fact that the plan is enigmatic and unpredictable is not a serious handicap.

Even the supposed ‘annexation’ by Russia of portions of Ukraine on 30 September 2022 does not appear to have substantially reduced this leeway. Early claims that these territories would be treated as integral parts of Russia,

³⁴ Bennhold, K. (2022), ‘Germany’s Chancellor Has ‘a Lot’ for Ukraine. But No Battle Tanks’, *New York Times*, 25 September 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/09/25/world/europe/olaf-scholz-germany-ukraine-war.html>.

³⁵ Troianovski, A. (2022), ‘Russia’s Retreat in Ukraine Pokes Holes in Putin’s Projection of Force’, *New York Times*, 11 September 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/live/2022/09/12/world/ukraine-russia-war>.

and that Ukrainian attacks on them would be considered a threat to Russia as a whole, have not persisted. Even the potential scenario of the full liberation of the ‘annexed’ territories by Ukraine would still be very remote from the existential threat to Russia as a whole that, according to formal declaratory policy, forms the core criterion for a Russian nuclear first strike.³⁶

Escalation/intimidation

As noted above, and with the exception of extreme cases referred to elsewhere in this paper like German chancellor Olaf Scholz or French president Emmanuel Macron, rhetorical nuclear threats by Russia steadily lost their effect in the first year of its war against Ukraine. But Russia could also see a ‘demonstration’ nuclear strike as a means of attempting to intimidate Ukraine into surrender, or the West into dropping its support for Kyiv, through the prospect of further and more powerful strikes.

This possibility has to be balanced against the fact that the opportunity to use nuclear intimidation to settle the outcome of the Ukraine conflict – akin to the *‘fait accompli’* strategy widely discussed in preceding years³⁷ – may have passed as swiftly as Russian hopes of immediate victory. As pointed out by Jyri Lavikainen:

Russia’s strategy is failing ... because it uses nuclear deterrence for something it is not suited for: as a coercive tool in a protracted war of conquest ... If Kyiv had fallen quickly, Russia’s strategy would have been more effective because then the West would have been forced to make the choice whether to intervene and whether it was ready for risk escalation.³⁸

Furthermore, the astonishing resilience demonstrated to date by the Ukrainian state and people argues strongly that a demonstrative strike would risk not achieving its aim of terrorizing Kyiv into suing for peace, and instead only harden Ukraine’s resolve to fight on.³⁹

Some analysts have in addition argued convincingly that the period in which the Russian military placed primary emphasis on non-strategic nuclear weapons as a war-winning or war-ending tool, in the context of a weaker Russian conventional force, has now passed. Lydia Wachs, of Germany’s SWP think-tank, states that:

Moscow’s over-reliance on nuclear weapons appears to have been significantly reduced in the past decade. Writings in Russian military journals suggest that the availability of non-nuclear capabilities is primarily intended to create more flexibility below the nuclear threshold and in the early phases of a conflict.

³⁶ Akimenko (2022), ‘Myth 6: ‘Russia’s nuclear threats are real and should be taken literally’.

³⁷ Luik, J. and Jermalavičius, T. ‘A plausible scenario of nuclear war in Europe, and how to deter it: A perspective from Estonia’, *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, 73(4), pp. 233–39, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00963402.2017.1338014>.

³⁸ Lavikainen (2023), *Nuclear deterrence in the Ukraine war*.

³⁹ Ven Bruusgaard (2023), ‘How Russia Decides to Go Nuclear’. For a discussion of ‘tactical’ or ‘low-yield’ nuclear weapons, see Broad, W. J. (2022), ‘The Smaller Bombs That Could Turn Ukraine Into a Nuclear War Zone’, *New York Times*, 21 March 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/03/21/science/russia-nuclear-ukraine.html>.

Its most recent military doctrines also indicate that Moscow is raising the bar for nuclear weapons use.⁴⁰

Detailed analysis by a team of researchers at RAND suggests that Russia believes it is developing its extremely long-range conventional strike capabilities sufficiently to be able in future ‘to terminate the conflict prior to nuclear escalation’.⁴¹ Unlike Russia’s Ground Forces, significant elements of these capabilities remain largely untapped in Russia’s war against Ukraine to date – although, as Wachs also notes, this dynamic may be challenged as Russia digs deeper into its range of capabilities for inflicting damage on Ukraine.⁴²

But the option of victory through intimidation should also be assessed in the broader context of other escalatory tactics available to Russia both within Ukraine itself and targeting its support base. Within Ukraine, these include attacks on civilian targets and critical infrastructure. Russia pivoted to missile attacks on major towns and cities as early as the fifth day of the conflict, once it became clear that the original plan to capture Kyiv had failed, in order to reinforce its demands at peace talks that were then under way in Belarus.⁴³ Outside Ukraine, Russia has tried to undermine support for Ukraine through its ability to block critical supply chains for energy, food and fertilizers, triggering an inflation crisis and threatening world hunger (accompanied by constant language pointing to possible nuclear use).⁴⁴ There are indications, too, of an ongoing search for other threats against the West – or potentially other actual avenues of escalation – including highlighting Russia’s capacity to attack civilian satellites.⁴⁵

If Russia wants to intimidate or blackmail Ukraine and its backers, over and above the ongoing conventional campaign, it has plenty of choices for escalation other than nuclear weapons.

In fact, if Russia wants to intimidate or blackmail Ukraine and its backers, over and above the ongoing conventional campaign, it has plenty of choices for escalation other than nuclear weapons. Each of these choices presents Russia with its own specific set of benefits, challenges and inevitable adverse consequences. A broader campaign of cyberattacks is just one example. Russia has not attempted to fully leverage its reserves of cyber power to target, or threaten, countries other than Ukraine, where cyber conflict has been relatively

⁴⁰ Wachs, L. (2022), *The Role of Nuclear Weapons in Russia’s Strategic Deterrence*, SWP Comment, Berlin: Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik, <https://www.swp-berlin.org/en/publication/the-role-of-nuclear-weapons-in-russias-strategic-deterrence>.

⁴¹ Reach, C. et al. (2023), *Russia’s Evolution Toward a Unified Strategic Operation: The Influence of Geography and Conventional Capacity*, Research Report, RAND Corporation, https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RRA1233-8.html.

⁴² Wachs (2022), *The Role of Nuclear Weapons in Russia’s Strategic Deterrence*.

⁴³ Giles, K. (2022), ‘This is Russia’s way of war. Putin has no qualm about medieval levels of brutality’, *Guardian*, 2 March 2022, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2022/mar/02/ukraine-russia-vladimir-putin-medieval-levels-of-brutality>.

⁴⁴ European Pravda (2022), ‘Russia to demand concessions, threatening world with hunger – Ukraine’s Foreign Minister’, 15 September 2022, <https://www.pravda.com.ua/eng/news/2022/09/15/7367511>.

⁴⁵ Reuters (2022), ‘Russia warns West: We can target your commercial satellites’, 27 October 2022, <https://www.reuters.com/world/russia-says-west-commerical-satellites-could-be-targets-2022-10-27>.

contained.⁴⁶ Another example is the potential for direct threats to the lives of Ukraine's citizens, including children, who have been abducted to Russia during the conflict. Chemical, biological and radiological attacks on Ukraine or its supporters have not yet been reported in contexts directly linked to the war. In short, Russia should only be expected to turn to nuclear use once other levers available to it – i.e. ones that are less likely to bring repercussions as serious as those to be expected in response to a nuclear strike – have been used, and have become (or are shown to be) unsatisfactory.

Following doctrine

As noted above, it has been argued that President Putin's address on 21 September 2022 represented an adjustment to Russian nuclear policy. The specific claim was that declaratory policy on when nuclear weapons can be used had been explicitly expanded from the ambiguous – but nonetheless very limited – criteria laid out in published doctrine, to now include a threat to Russia's territorial integrity as a justification for nuclear use. That territorial integrity was assumed to extend to areas 'annexed' from Ukraine.

This interpretation was implausible on two grounds. First, as is common in response to comments by Putin, it conflated intimidatory language with genuine intent, notwithstanding the long history of threats of this kind from Putin proving hollow and having no impact on Russian actions in reality. Second, Russia's responses to attacks on Ukrainian territory that it claims as its own had already been tested. Despite earlier concerns that an attack on Russian-annexed Crimea might trigger a nuclear response, Ukrainian strikes on the peninsula and into the Belgorod region of Russia clearly demonstrated that Ukrainian attacks on Russia's illegally annexed territory, or indeed on Russia itself, do not automatically trigger escalatory retaliation of any kind, let alone nuclear.⁴⁷ And while Putin claimed, implausibly, that the wave of Russian strikes on Ukrainian cities and critical infrastructure on 10–11 October 2022 were in direct response to damage inflicted by Ukraine on the bridge linking Russia with Crimea across the Kerch Strait, this in itself showed that Russia has other courses of action that it can present as retaliatory strikes but which fall far short of escalation to nuclear use.⁴⁸

This is not to say that there will never be a threshold or culminating point at which sudden or cumulative damage to Russia itself is considered sufficiently serious or dangerous that it leads to a nuclear response. Neither does it mean that the views of Russia's armed forces on nuclear use completely rule out the war in Ukraine as a potential trigger. For instance, it is within 'regional wars' that Russian strategists conceptualize a transition from the use of strategic conventional weapons to

⁴⁶ Kagubare, I. (2022), 'Putin to choose cyber warfare before nuclear weapons, former NSA chief says', *The Hill*, 13 December 2022, <https://thehill.com/policy/cybersecurity/3774113-putin-to-choose-cyberwarfare-before-nuclear-weapons-former-nsa-chief-says>.

⁴⁷ Cohen, N. (2022), 'Could Putin still trigger nuclear war?', *Spectator*, 16 September 2022, <https://www.spectator.co.uk/article/how-worried-should-we-be-about-nuclear-war>.

⁴⁸ Beaumont, P., Higgins, C. and Mazhulin, A. (2022), 'Putin warns of further retaliation as Ukraine hit by massive wave of strikes', *Guardian*, 10 October 2022, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/oct/10/explosions-kyiv-ukraine-war-russia-crimea-putin-bridge>.

non-strategic nuclear weapons.⁴⁹ Furthermore, as noted by Kristin Ven Bruusgaard: ‘Russian military doctrine provides little guidance for the situation Russia currently faces in Ukraine because the same doctrine declares that Russian conventional forces should be able to win this kind of war.’⁵⁰

There also remains the possibility of a major threat to Russian sovereignty arising by indirect means, precipitating the kind of existential concern that among the expert community is a more widely accepted probable trigger for Russian nuclear use. This could come about if, for example, defeats for Russia in a conflict bring about a major collapse of the armed forces, leading in turn to severe domestic unrest and instability. But strikes by Ukraine on individual targets within Russia, with or without the capability being provided by Kyiv’s Western backers to deliver them, should not be expected to meet those criteria. In any case, even after potential depletion of its supplies of long-range missiles, as noted above Russia still holds in reserve a substantial range of options for escalatory retaliation before resorting to nuclear use. Crucially, none of these other options would incur the same kind of consequences for Russia itself as nuclear use, as discussed further below.

Destructive effect

The majority of open-source analysis of the likely impact of use of non-strategic nuclear weapons by Russia in Ukraine concurs that their actual military utility is strictly limited, unless fired in substantial salvos. Relatively dispersed military targets mean that the benefit of a small nuclear strike over conventional weapons is incremental, and would in no way offer a rationale for the substantial escalation that this would represent.⁵¹

This, however, leaves open the option of an attack on non-military targets, such as critical civilian infrastructure, major populated areas, or a demonstration strike over water that causes minimal initial damage and casualties. This last category of attack overlaps with the possibility of a nuclear strike that Russia might opt to deliver not in spite of, but because of, its shock value and destructive capacity. In the autumn of 2022, Russia responded to reverses on the battlefield with intensification of the missile campaign against critical civilian infrastructure or residential areas in Ukraine, and in multiple cases the intent appeared to be arbitrary and punitive rather than to achieve or facilitate any specific war aim.⁵² One or more nuclear strikes could form part of a vindictive response intended simply to cause misery and destruction in Ukraine in recognition of Russian failure to conquer it – the rationale being that if Russia can’t have Ukraine, nobody can.⁵³ This would mirror, on a vastly greater scale, the behaviour of individual Russian

⁴⁹ Wachs (2022), *The Role of Nuclear Weapons in Russia’s Strategic Deterrence*.

⁵⁰ Ven Bruusgaard (2023), ‘How Russia Decides to Go Nuclear’.

⁵¹ Leicester, J. (2022), ‘What’s Putin thinking? Tough to know for nuclear analysts’, AP, 4 October 2022, <https://apnews.com/article/russia-ukraine-putin-eb71cd93c46e99910b8be948678d4e43>.

⁵² Al Jazeera (2022), ‘Ukraine dam hit by Russian missiles in Zelenskyy’s hometown’, 15 September 2022, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2022/9/15/ukraine-dam-hit-by-russian-missiles-in-zelenskyy-s-hometown>.

⁵³ Davis, J. (2022), ‘Team Putin Threatens Maniacal Response to Bitter War Losses’, *Daily Beast*, 15 September 2022, <https://www.thedailybeast.com/russian-state-media-threatens-scorched-earth-response-to-bitter-losses-in-ukraine>.

soldiers and units when presented with the reality of life in Ukraine, where rather than aspiring to it themselves they seek to destroy it⁵⁴ – a response summarized by some Russians as *ne pobedim, tak nagadim* ('if you can't beat it, befoul it').

Conditions

In addition to nuclear use meeting a specific objective for Russia, there also needs to be a conviction in Moscow that the outcome in terms of international response would be manageable. The most direct and serious countermeasure would be a reciprocal nuclear strike on Russia itself. But heavyweight Russian commentators have expressed '99 per cent' confidence that the US would not respond in kind to a tactical nuclear strike,⁵⁵ and assess that 'nobody in or around the Kremlin believes the Western powers will strike a nuclear attack on Russia if it uses a nuclear device in Ukraine'.⁵⁶

This means that it is essential that all countries – not only Western powers – should seek alternative means of deterrence of nuclear use; either through undermining Russian confidence that there would not be a nuclear response, or through conveying greater conviction that a non-nuclear response would be of sufficiently destructive or incapacitating effect that there was no subsequent doubt that launching a nuclear strike had been a catastrophic error. And the warnings of consequences have to be more credible than those made before February 2022 in efforts to dissuade Russia from launching a fresh invasion of Ukraine – since those warnings were self-evidently discounted by Putin.

It must be made clear in entirely unambiguous terms that any use of nuclear weapons, whether tactical or not, in Ukraine or beyond, would bring consequences that would be devastating not just to Russia but to Putin personally.

In particular, it must be made clear in entirely unambiguous terms that any use of nuclear weapons, whether tactical or not, in Ukraine or beyond, would bring consequences that would be devastating not just to Russia but to Putin personally. Given Putin's understandable tendency to disregard Western words and be guided instead by Western actions, the clarity in messaging must be reinforced by discernible indicators of preparedness to follow through on it.⁵⁷

⁵⁴ Giles, K. (2022), 'The Day After The War', *Ares & Athena*, May 2022, <https://chacr.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2022/05/AA19-Russia.pdf>.

⁵⁵ Kobzev, A. A. (2022), 'Сергей Караганов: "Это надо прямо назвать Отечественной войной"' [Sergey Karaganov: We need simply to call this a Patriotic War], *Profil*, 26 September 2022, <https://profile.ru/politics/sergej-karaganov-eto-nado-pryamo-nazvat-otechestvennoj-vojnoj-1167557>.

⁵⁶ Wikistrat (2022), 'Will Putin Go Nuclear?', 22 September 2022, <https://www.wikistrat.com/post/putin-goes-nuclear>.

⁵⁷ London, D. (2022), 'Addressing Putin's Nuclear Threat: Thinking Like the Cold War KGB Officer That He Was', *Just Security*, 18 October 2022, <https://www.justsecurity.org/83605/addressing-putins-nuclear-threat-thinking-like-the-cold-war-kgb-officer-that-he-was>.

Instead, however, public statements by Western leaders including President Biden have not been worded in a manner that is likely to convince Russia that the response will be sufficiently damaging to outweigh any conceivable gains. Writing for the *New York Times* in May 2022, Biden stated that the US response to nuclear use would be ‘severe consequences’.⁵⁸ Then, in September, asked in a television interview for a specific message to Putin on use of nuclear weapons, Biden replied: ‘Don’t. Don’t. Don’t. You will change the face of war unlike anything since World War II.’⁵⁹ In light of previous comments by Putin about the probable outcomes of nuclear war – and the more disturbing aspects of Russia’s so-called ‘death cult’, characterized by the idea that a ‘purifying apocalypse’ is something to be embraced⁶⁰ – this could even serve as an incentive, and a means of bringing about the historical destiny for Russia that Putin has repeatedly described.⁶¹

A further unscripted comment by Biden, at a Democratic Party fundraising event in early October 2022, that Putin was ‘not joking’ about potential use of nuclear weapons and that this presented the world with ‘the prospect of Armageddon’, provided another example of mixed messaging from Washington.⁶² Sceptics concluded that Biden was once again showing his susceptibility to Kremlin narratives that the threat of nuclear war was real and substantial, while optimists countered that he was likely to be signalling to the Kremlin that the consequences of nuclear use would be catastrophic. But the key outcome of his off-the-cuff remark was confusion; and if even Biden’s closest Western observers were confused, Putin will have stood even less chance of receiving and understanding the right message.

Indicators

Throughout the intense speculation over Russia’s nuclear posture based on what Putin says, there has been relatively little attention paid to what the military actually does. Western intelligence chiefs have repeatedly reported, after fresh nuclear scares in response to rhetoric from Moscow, that no real preparations to change nuclear posture have been detected.⁶³

Russia is also unlikely to order a nuclear strike without at least some effort to deliver a final warning to the West, and to prepare the information space for delivery of Moscow’s narratives during and after the attack. This means that

⁵⁸ Biden, J. (2022), ‘What America Will and Will Not Do in Ukraine’, *New York Times*, 31 May 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/05/31/opinion/biden-ukraine-strategy.html>.

⁵⁹ 60 Minutes (2022), ‘President Joe Biden: The 2022 60 Minutes Interview’, interview with Scott Pelley, CBS News, 18 September 2022, <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/president-joe-biden-60-minutes-interview-transcript-2022-09-18>.

⁶⁰ Meduza (2023), ‘A military defeat is the only cure’ Sociologist Dina Khapaeva on how Russia’s ‘death cult’ led to the war in Ukraine’, 19 January 2023, <https://meduza.io/en/feature/2023/01/19/a-military-defeat-is-the-only-cure>.

⁶¹ France 24 (2018), ‘Russians ‘will go to heaven’ in event of nuclear war: Putin’, 18 October 2018, <https://www.france24.com/en/20181018-russians-will-go-heaven-event-nuclear-war-putin>; RT News (2018), ‘Why would we want a world without Russia?’ Putin on Moscow’s nuclear doctrine’, 7 March 2018, <https://www.rt.com/news/420715-putin-world-russia-nuclear>.

⁶² Madhani, A., Knickmeyer, E. and Boak, J. (2022), ‘Biden’s ‘Armageddon’ talk edges beyond bounds of US intel’, AP, 7 October 2022, <https://apnews.com/article/biden-nuclear-risk-1d0f1e40cff3a92c662c57f274ce0e25>.

⁶³ Sabbagh, D. (2022), ‘No signs Russia is preparing to use nuclear weapon’, says GCHQ boss, *Guardian*, 11 October 2022, <https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2022/oct/11/russia-use-nuclear-weapons-gchq-putin>.

there are a number of potential indicators for possible nuclear use that can be deduced from observation of Russian information behaviours.

It is unlikely, although not impossible, that a nuclear strike would be ordered in the context of Russia's lingering habit of referring to its war as a 'special military operation' which by definition is supposed to be limited in scope. This would present both doctrinal and conceptual contradictions. An effective admission that Russia is in fact engaged in a major war – or even a substantial regional one – would remove this obstacle and thus marginally reduce the unlikelihood of a nuclear strike.

Other indicators would include more substantiated justifications for a strike. Putin's speech of 30 September 2022, claiming the annexation of four Ukrainian regions, included a long-expected reference to nuclear use by the US in 1945 as a 'precedent'.⁶⁴ This reference could potentially be followed up with arguments that Russia now faces a similar challenge: looking for a route to war termination that avoids substantial casualties among its own military forces. Continued framing of the US nuclear strikes on Japan as either standard practice, or as a US precedent that justifies other countries in doing the same, would suggest that Russia is preparing domestic and world opinion for a strike of its own.

A change in the content of, or medium for, delivery of nuclear threats would also be an indicator of a potential change in Russian intent. Possibilities could include a change from general intimidatory language by Putin himself to a specific and tangible threat; or a change in source, where specific language crosses the boundary from state media and propagandists to formal statements by Putin or by senior military leaders. One example of this came in Putin's 'state of the nation' address to the Federal Assembly on 21 February 2023: this time, the nuclear threat was oblique, and grounded in the language of military doctrine, instead of the explicit bombast heard on previous occasions. Putin referred to a plan by Western powers 'to grow a local conflict into a global confrontation,' continuing: 'This is how we understand it and we will respond accordingly, because this represents an existential threat to our country.'⁶⁵ Observers attuned to Russian doctrinal language around 'existential threat' recognized that this was intended as a reference to a potential nuclear response, but at the time of writing it is not possible yet to determine whether this was an isolated instance or the start of a trend.

Given the objectives for potential nuclear use laid out above, another strong signal of increased likelihood would be signs that Putin has finally lost confidence in his ability to win the war in Ukraine. This would mean his acceptance of the inability of Russia's military to win conventionally; of the failure of other tactics such as food and energy blackmail to remove Western support for Ukraine; and of the reality that the Ukrainian state continues to function despite sustained

⁶⁴ President of Russia (2022), 'Signing of treaties on accession of Donetsk and Lugansk people's republics and Zaporozhye and Kherson regions to Russia', 30 September 2022, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/69465>.

⁶⁵ President of Russia (2023), 'Presidential Address to Federal Assembly', 21 February 2023, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/70565>.

assaults on its critical infrastructure. The moment at which Putin feels his options are exhausted is likely to be the most significantly dangerous decision point.⁶⁶

Constraints

However, Russia will also be fully aware that the consequences of nuclear use are not limited to US or Western retaliation and/or countermeasures. There are a number of other inevitable significant second- and third-order effects that will be readily apparent to Moscow.

There are already indicators that countries that were ambivalent with regard to Russia's war against Ukraine – or even supportive of Putin's actions – may now be more hesitant in offering their backing. In mid-September 2022, for instance, at the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) summit Putin was obliged to publicly acknowledge the 'questions and concerns' of both China's president Xi Jinping and India's prime minister Narendra Modi, telling the latter: 'We will do our best to stop this as soon as possible.' In the following month, a public rebuke of Putin delivered by President Emomali Rahmon of Tajikistan, speaking at the Conference on Interaction and Confidence Building Measures in Asia (CICA) in Astana, Kazakhstan, was a further indicator of a shift in the power balance with Moscow.⁶⁷

If there is a realization in Moscow that Russia's international authority is being undermined, it is reasonable to assume it is also understood that use of nuclear weapons by Russia would bring it down altogether. This is significant in circumstances in which Russia, having destroyed its relationship with the West, is more reliant on links with and support from other regions of the world – in particular from China, whose reaction is likely to be of most concern to Moscow.⁶⁸ Recognition of this dependence, and its significance for Russia's continued resilience to Western sanctions, will constitute a significant constraint on reckless actions like nuclear strikes.

There are also procedural constraints on nuclear use. Western defence correspondents have asserted that Putin is unable to order a nuclear attack on his own, and that such a command needs the cooperation of the defence minister and the chief of general staff.⁶⁹ Kristin Ven Bruusgaard, a leading authority on Russia's nuclear posture and thinking, notes that:

⁶⁶ *The Economist* (2022), 'Do Russia's military setbacks increase the risk of nuclear conflict?', 14 September 2022, <https://www.economist.com/the-economist-explains/2022/09/14/do-russias-military-setbacks-increase-the-risk-of-nuclear-conflict>.

⁶⁷ Leonard, P. (@Peter__Leonard) via Twitter (2022), 'Tajikistan's president demands respect from Russian President Vladimir Putin in a remarkable outburst at Central Asia-Russia summit in Astana', 14 October 2022, https://twitter.com/Peter__Leonard/status/1581017812264398848; Dawson, B. (2022), 'Putin forced to endure a 7-minute-long rant from close ally who rebuked the Russian leader and demanded he shows respect', *Business Insider*, 15 October 2022, <https://www.businessinsider.com/putin-endures-long-rant-close-ally-complaining-lack-of-respect-2022-10?r=US&IR=T>.

⁶⁸ Parfitt, T. and Tang, D. (2022), 'We're close friends, insist Putin and Xi (at a distance)', *The Times*, 15 September 2022, <https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/american-interference-is-ugly-putin-tells-xi-8v6pqrmlm>.

⁶⁹ Brown, L. (2022), 'Will Putin use nuclear weapons? These are his options', *The Times*, 16 September 2022, <https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/will-putin-use-nuclear-weapons-these-are-his-options-t7k2vsgc5>.

[T]he process for commanding the use of nuclear weapons requires the sign-off of multiple officials, unlike the system in the United States, where the commander in chief has full latitude ... the Russian military has a disproportionate impact on nuclear policy.⁷⁰

Consideration of the specific mechanism for ordering a nuclear strike is outside the scope of an open-source study; nonetheless, it is certain that, after a decision by the president, there will be a chain of orders passing down through command structures to the point of delivery. It is reasonable to assume that this will pass both through safeguards and through rational individuals. It follows that even if a strike is ordered by Putin and then fully authorized by Sergei Shoigu and Valeriy Gerasimov (respectively, Russia's defence minister and chief of general staff), this does not automatically mean that it will be carried out under all circumstances: there are documented instances of individuals within the Soviet/Russian system going against procedure, standing orders and direct instructions to prevent a nuclear exchange.⁷¹

Russia will be aware that its own nuclear use would risk precipitating a huge increase in nuclear proliferation, and would substantially raise the likelihood of nuclear use by other countries.

Russia will also be aware that its own nuclear use would risk precipitating a huge increase in nuclear proliferation, and would substantially raise the likelihood of nuclear use by other countries – especially if the US and wider Western response to nuclear use is not convincingly devastating for Russia. The only rational response by other nations around the world to Russian nuclear use in the context of the war in Ukraine is for them to acquire their own capacity for responding in kind in order to maintain deterrence.⁷² Russia has no desire to see an increasing number of smaller countries developing nuclear capabilities, with the profound destabilization this would entail. There is a parallel with the development of cyber capabilities globally, where Russia expressed significant and apparently genuine concern over the spread of advanced capabilities and the threat to strategic stability this entailed.⁷³ Uncontrolled nuclear proliferation would be an even more disturbing prospect for Moscow, especially after a precedent for use under non-existential circumstances had been set.

⁷⁰ Ven Bruusgaard (2023), 'How Russia Decides to Go Nuclear'.

⁷¹ Unal, B. with Cournoyer, J., Inverarity, C. and Afina, Y. (2022), *Uncertainty and complexity in nuclear decision-making: Balancing reason, logic, cognition and intuition at strategic and operational levels*, Research Paper, London: Royal Institute of International Affairs, <https://www.chathamhouse.org/2022/03/uncertainty-and-complexity-nuclear-decision-making>.

⁷² Huhtanen, T. (2022), 'What should Europe do if Russia uses a nuke?', EUObserver, 19 September 2022, <https://euobserver.com/opinion/156075>; Lavikainen (2023), *Nuclear deterrence in the Ukraine war*.

⁷³ Conflict Studies Research Centre and Moscow State University Institute of Information Security Issues (2012), *Russia's "Draft Convention on International Information Security": A Commentary*, http://www.conflictstudies.co.uk/files/20120426_CSRC_IISI_Commentary.pdf.

Finally, probable Russian recognition of the effectiveness with which the threat of nuclear escalation has constrained Western backing for Ukraine also implies recognition that if that threat is realized, those constraints will disappear. Nuclear use in Ukraine would most probably remove all hesitation in supplying any and all weapons systems to Kyiv, as well as overriding any disincentive for them to be used to carry the fight to Russia itself.⁷⁴ To the extent that perceptions of Russia's current military incapacity – and hence vulnerability to deep cross-border attack from Ukraine – are shared in Moscow, this in itself should provide a substantial deterrent to rendering the war a 'no holds barred' contest by means of a nuclear strike.

Wild cards: Putin and reality

All of the above conditions need to be considered with the caveat that they assume President Putin is able to make a rational choice based on an objective assessment of his and Russia's situation. They do not take account of the possibility of Putin being obsessed and/or delusional, or of him simply not receiving a clear or accurate picture from those around him of world events and the progress of his war. Neither is it impossible that this problem is exacerbated by Putin's own state of physical or mental health; a reported Danish assessment contends that his personal decision-making capacity may even be impeded by medication he is taking.⁷⁵

Factors like these may contribute to the indicators of an increasingly wide disconnect between Putin and reality. One of the most relevant of these for considering Russia's possible nuclear use is the way, in his address on 21 September 2022, Putin embellished the central 'myth' that the West wants to destroy Russia with the notion that Russia has been threatened with Western weapons of mass destruction. If there is a possibility that Putin genuinely believes some or all of the assertions he made in that speech that have little basis in fact, this presents the danger that he may perceive that he is running out of options other than nuclear use on the basis of entirely false evidence.⁷⁶

Distorting influences on Putin's choices could also include isolation from military decision-making and planning. Detailed disclosures of Russia's plans by the US and the UK in the weeks and months leading up to the February 2022 invasion of Ukraine, in contrast to the last-minute orders to move for the Russian army, demonstrate that under certain circumstances Western intelligence services can have better insight into and forewarning of Russian leadership intent than Russia's own chain of command. Such communications failures and evident disconnects within the Russian system could in turn mean that the arguments

⁷⁴ McFaul, M. (2022), 'Putin can escalate the war. But it comes with enormous costs', *Washington Post*, 13 October 2022, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2022/10/13/putin-ukraine-escalation-power-war>.

⁷⁵ Rottbøll, E. (2022), 'Danish military intelligence suggests drug-induced megalomania may have influenced Putin to invade Ukraine', *Berlingske*, 30 December 2022, <https://www.berlingske.dk/internationalt/danish-military-intelligence-suggests-drug-induced-megalomania-may>.

⁷⁶ Galeotti, M. (2022), 'Fear and loathing in the Kremlin, where Putin writhes in his own trap', *The Sunday Times*, 17 September 2022, <https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/fear-and-loathing-in-the-kremlin-where-putin-writhes-in-his-own-trap-csxptgmzz>.

against nuclear use – in particular that it would not achieve Russian military or political objectives – might or might not be presented to Putin.

Similarly, the flaw in the idea that Putin does not need to use nuclear weapons because he gets sufficient benefits from just the threat to use them – and that these are benefits that actual use would eliminate – is that the very same calculus applied before the February 2022 invasion of Ukraine. At that time, some Western powers were scrambling for means to placate Moscow in order to avert the looming invasion, but Putin was intent on invading anyway⁷⁷ – regardless of whether this was seen outside the Kremlin as a rational step or not. There is a substantial difference between the threat of conventional escalation of a conflict that had already involved an illegal annexation carried out with relative impunity in 2014 on the one hand, and the threat of nuclear use on the other, but a number of other parallels are also already discernible. Analysts who contend that Putin would have to be mad – or ‘really stupid’ – to use a nuclear weapon need to consider that viewed from outside Russia, invading Ukraine in the first place has already met these criteria.⁷⁸ And yet, from within the Kremlin, ordering a full-scale invasion on 24 February was a rational choice based on Putin’s priorities and the information available to him at the time. Putin miscalculated Western resolve in early 2022. However, this miscalculation was a direct result of previous Western failures to fully support Ukraine in the period since 2014, or indeed to respond firmly to other hostile Russian acts since well before then.⁷⁹ It follows that even greater efforts are now required to ensure Putin is wholly persuaded that Western resolve would not be lacking once again should the nuclear threshold be crossed.

In short, the argument that Russia would not use nuclear weapons because it would clearly not be in Russia’s interest to do so falls down on the example – once again – of the invasion of Ukraine. This, too, appeared to run counter to Russia’s interests, but was prompted by Putin responding to an entirely different set of incentives and on the basis of a deeply flawed assessment of the situation both in Ukraine itself and regarding the probable Western response.

Outlook and recommendations

Considering all the above factors, even though the corridor of uncertainty is far narrower than has been widely assumed, there remains a non-zero chance that Vladimir Putin may order a nuclear strike on Ukraine. Threats implied by Putin and other senior Russian leaders, and amplified by the rhetoric of other Russian public figures, have until now been shown to be empty. But a change in their

⁷⁷ Dettmer, J. (2022), ‘Macron Flies to Moscow Claiming His Diplomacy Will End Ukraine Crisis’, VOA, 6 February 2022, <https://www.voanews.com/a/macron-flies-to-moscow-claiming-his-diplomacy-will-end-ukraine-crisis/6430439.html>.

⁷⁸ Fidler, S. (2022), ‘Vladimir Putin’s Nuclear Threats Work, but Using the Weapons Probably Wouldn’t’, *Wall Street Journal*, 22 September 2022, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/vladimir-putins-nuclear-threats-work-but-using-the-weapons-probably-wouldnt-11663871147>.

⁷⁹ As for example with the UK’s muted response to the murder of Aleksandr Litvinenko in November 2006. See Allan, D. (2018), *Managed Confrontation: UK Policy Towards Russia After the Salisbury Attack*, Research Paper, London: Royal Institute of International Affairs, <https://www.chathamhouse.org/2018/10/managed-confrontation-uk-policy-towards-russia-after-salisbury-attack>. For a broader survey of Russian hostile actions overseas before 2022, see Giles, K. (2022), *Russia’s War on Everybody: And What it Means for You*, London: Bloomsbury.

delivery, content or context could indicate that they had become more closely aligned with actual intent.

To attempt to prevent that development, the non-zero chance should be reduced still further by reconsidered messaging from the US and its allies regarding the probable outcomes of nuclear use. In particular, this messaging should highlight that, contrary to possible expectations that Russia could control the situation after nuclear use through maintaining escalation dominance, a nuclear strike would in fact unleash processes that would be far beyond Russia's control because they would involve responses and reactions not just from the US but from across the world. Diplomatic efforts to ensure Russia is convinced of this should include working with countries beyond the Euro-Atlantic area – not limited to China and India – to reinforce multilateral condemnation of nuclear brinkmanship and emphasis from as many parts of the globe as possible on the disastrous consequences of breaking the nuclear taboo.⁸⁰

The argument for promising grave consequences but remaining vague over what they will be is strong in that this stance maintains flexibility of response and complicates Russian calculus through uncertainty. However, the experience of attempting the same kind of deterrence of Moscow ahead of the February 2022 invasion of Ukraine shows that it also suffers from a lack of credibility: the track record of Western powers combined with the vagueness of the threats to leave Russia unconvinced that the response would be sufficiently significant. This requires a clearer and more unambiguous statement of intent from the US and its allies, that goes beyond a promise of 'grave consequences' and instead touches on interests of personal significance not only to Vladimir Putin but also to his senior military leaders.⁸¹

Continued nuclear threats from Russia are almost inevitable. They may become more strident as their effect wanes with repetition, but a change in their content or delivery would be more significant.

Continued nuclear threats from Russia are almost inevitable. They may become more strident as their effect wanes with repetition, but as noted above, a change in their content or delivery would be more significant. A ramping up of threat language may be accompanied by internal pressure to resort to nuclear use if Russia's other tools and levers – not just the military campaign in Ukraine, but political and economic campaigns against the West – are seen to be failing. The US is reported to have been delivering 'private warnings' to Moscow,⁸²

⁸⁰ Seely, R., Bretton-Gordon, H. de and Bromund, T. (2023), *The U.S. and Its Allies Must Understand and Respond to Russia's Nuclear Threats*, Background, The Heritage Foundation, <https://www.heritage.org/defense/report/the-us-and-its-allies-must-understand-and-respond-russias-nuclear-threats>.

⁸¹ Polymeropoulos, M. (2022), 'Don't obsess over nukes — just keep the faith with Ukraine', *Washington Examiner*, 15 September 2022, <https://www.washingtonexaminer.com/opinion/dont-obsess-over-nukes-just-keep-the-faith-with-ukraine>.

⁸² Sonne, P. and Hudson, J. (2022), 'U.S. has sent private warnings to Russia against using a nuclear weapon', *Washington Post*, 22 September 2022, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/national-security/2022/09/22/russia-nuclear-threat-us-options>.

but these too were ineffective before February 2022. They should therefore be augmented by public messaging emphasizing not only the inevitability of a highly damaging US response, but also the international repercussions of increased isolation and nuclear proliferation as discussed above. Direct and blunt messaging by Western powers should aim to leave absolutely no doubt that Russia – and Putin personally – have far more to lose from nuclear use than they stand to gain.

In particular, as in any scenario where the desired outcome is deterring or dissuading Russia from some damaging action, it remains vital for Western leaders to refrain from explaining what they will *not* do in response to that action.⁸³ Russia's conviction that it could use nuclear weapons in Ukraine without retaliation in kind from the West will only have been deepened by President Macron's signalling, in October 2022, that this was a correct assessment.⁸⁴ Providing comfort and confidence to Russian planners in this manner by removing worst-case scenarios from their risk calculations makes the world more dangerous. Assurances from major Western powers ahead of time that there would not be a military response to Russia's plans to invade Ukraine gave the Kremlin a green light to go ahead.⁸⁵ Similar assurances over nuclear use will serve only to encourage even more damaging action by Russia.⁸⁶

This is because Russia's nuclear weapons have been the primary reason why Western powers have tolerated the atrocities perpetrated in Ukraine. In fact, possession of nuclear weapons has granted Russia broad immunity from the consequences of its actions, and Putin has exploited this to the maximum.⁸⁷ This recognition of possession of nuclear weapons as a 'get out of jail free card' sets a highly dangerous precedent, as it incentivizes other states to acquire or instrumentalize their own nuclear weapons given their obvious benefits in terms of escaping responsibility for aggression at home or against neighbours.

Meanwhile, Western support for Ukraine should be guided by assessments of Russia's actual nuclear posture, and by the experience of Russia's reaction to the phases of the conflict to date, rather than by Russia's use of nuclear weapons as a tool for information operations. The success of Russia's campaign of altering Western perceptions of escalation and of nuclear danger must be recognized and adjusted for. In particular, there is scant rationale for continuing the present 'too little, just in time' approach to providing supplies of weapons systems to Ukraine. This does no more than prolong the war, at immense cost primarily for Ukraine.⁸⁸

⁸³ Giles (2021), *What Deters Russia*.

⁸⁴ Macron, E. (@EmmanuelMacron) via Twitter (2022), 'We do not want a World War' [thread], 13 October 2022, <https://twitter.com/EmmanuelMacron/status/1580504648821387268>.

⁸⁵ Saul, D. (2022), 'Biden Says 'No Intention' To Deploy U.S. Troops In Ukraine – Here's What The U.S. Is Prepared To Do Instead', *Forbes*, 25 January 2022, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/dereksaul/2022/01/25/biden-says-no-intention-to-deploy-us-troops-in-ukraine-heres-what-the-us-is-prepared-to-do-instead>.

⁸⁶ Aboud, L. and Foy, H. (2022), 'Macron criticised for outlining stance on use of nuclear weapons', *Financial Times*, 13 October 2022, <https://www.ft.com/content/f08c920d-84db-4c91-89f7-e23a1329edef>.

⁸⁷ Applebaum, A. (2022), 'Fear of Nuclear War Has Warped the West's Ukraine Strategy', *The Atlantic*, 7 November 2022, <https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2022/11/russia-ukraine-nuclear-war-fear-us-policy/672020>.

⁸⁸ Greene, S. and Polyakova, A. (2023), 'Russia Wants a Long War: The West Needs to Send Ukraine More Arms, More Quickly', *Foreign Affairs*, 16 March 2023, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/united-states/russia-wants-long-war>.

One key Russian success has been to replace escalation management with escalation avoidance as the priority in Western thinking. Unhelpful public characterizations of Kremlin thinking make the problem worse. The idea that ‘Putin never de-escalates’ is presented as a simple and unchallengeable fact,⁸⁹ despite having little basis in reality.⁹⁰ Nigel Gould-Davies, a senior fellow at the International Institute for Strategic Studies, explains that one ‘flaw of red-line orthodoxy is that, in fixating on a state’s escalatory response, it considers only the risks and dilemmas this would impose on an adversary, and not those that the escalating state itself faces’.⁹¹ To put it more simply, the idea has taken root that only Russia can escalate – and that this must be avoided at almost all cost.

Now that Russia’s campaigns have transformed ‘escalation’ into a word that evokes instinctive fear among Western politicians, it can successfully use it to direct Western strategy by triggering that fear on demand. Russia is aided in this by a substantial number of Western voices equating the prospect of Ukrainian success in defending itself with ‘escalation’.⁹² And this fear of threatened Russian escalation has prevailed despite repeated demonstrations that Russia conducts escalation at a time when it considers it appropriate or necessary for its own war aims – or failure to meet them – rather than as a response to incremental changes in Western support for Ukraine.⁹³

And yet, as further pointed out by Gould-Davies:

To signal unilateral restraint is to make an unforced concession. Worse, it emboldens Russia to probe for, and try to impose, further limits on U.S. action – making the war more, not less, risky.⁹⁴

In fact, if Russia is allowed to achieve success through nuclear intimidation, this validates the concept of nuclear coercion not only for Moscow but for other aggressive, assertive or rogue states around the world. The inevitable result would be further nuclear destabilization, accompanied by a probable renewed acceleration in proliferation. In this way, rather than being the safe course of action, being influenced by Russian nuclear threats could in fact be the greatest nuclear risk of all.⁹⁵

⁸⁹ Vernon, W. and Horti, S. (2022), ‘Ukraine war: Kyiv rejects Putin’s Russian Orthodox Christmas truce’, BBC News, 6 January 2022, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-64178912>.

⁹⁰ Snegovaya, M. and Whitmore, B. ‘Vladimir Putin Often Backs Down’, *Foreign Policy*, 8 July 2022, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2022/07/08/vladimir-putin-backs-down-russia-ukraine>.

⁹¹ Gould-Davies, N. (2023), ‘Putin Has No Red Lines’, *New York Times*, 1 January 2023, <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/01/01/opinion/putin-russia-ukraine-war-strategy.html>.

⁹² For just one example, see Kupchan, C. (2022), ‘It’s Time to Bring Russia and Ukraine to the Negotiating Table’, *New York Times*, 2 November 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/11/02/opinion/russia-ukraine-negotiation.html>.

⁹³ Republic of Estonia Ministry of Defence (2023), *Russia’s War in Ukraine*.

⁹⁴ Gould-Davies (2023), ‘Putin Has No Red Lines’.

⁹⁵ Cirincione, J. (2023) ‘Why Hasn’t Putin Used Nuclear Weapons?’ *Daily Beast*, 9 February 2023, <https://www.thedailybeast.com/why-hasnt-putin-used-nuclear-weapons>.

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Keir is the author of multiple publications explaining the Russian approach to warfare, including NATO's *Handbook of Russian Information Warfare* (NATO Defense College, 2016); and *Moscow Rules: What Drives Russia to Confront the West* (Brookings/Chatham House, 2019), an examination of the persistent factors causing relations with Russia to fall into crisis. He has previously described Russia's successful campaigns of nuclear intimidation in *What deters Russia: Enduring principles for responding to Moscow* (Chatham House, September 2021). His most recent book is *Russia's War on Everybody: And What it Means for You* (Bloomsbury, 2022), describing the human impact of Russia's campaigns to acquire power and influence around the world.

Acknowledgments

Grateful thanks are due to Lesley Kucharski, of Lawrence Livermore National Laboratory, and to two further anonymous colleagues for reviewing an earlier draft of this paper and providing multiple recommendations for improvements. We also thank the Russia Strategic Initiative, U.S. European Command, who generously supported this project, for permission to update this study and release it publicly.



This publication was funded by the Russia Strategic Initiative,
U.S. European Command.

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Cover image: Russian president Vladimir Putin oversees the training of the strategic deterrence forces, responsible for responding to threats of nuclear war, via a video link in Moscow on 26 October 2022.

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ISBN 978 1 78413 564 5

DOI 10.55317/9781784135645

Cite this paper: Giles, K. (2023), *Russian nuclear intimidation: How Russia uses nuclear threats to shape Western responses to aggression*, Research Paper, London: Royal Institute of International Affairs
<https://doi.org/10.55317/9781784135645>.

This publication is printed on FSC-certified paper.
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