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The growing role of the nuclear factor in interstate politics: The case of Russia's war against Ukraine

Policy paper

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Summary

The paper analyses the nuclear threats made by Russia in the course of its war against Ukraine as part of a complex analysis of Russia's internal doctrines and international reaction that seeks to shed light on the Kremlin's reasons for nuclear coercion. The implications of such nuclear threats and possible scenarios for nuclear weapon use by Russia are discussed. The conclusions provide an overview of the possible outcomes of Russia's nuclear coercion for the future role of nuclear weapons, the Non-Proliferation Treaty regime and the international world order.

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Introduction

The world faces a systemic crisis in the field of international security in 2022. The Russian aggression towards Ukraine has called into question the values of the liberal regimes and systems on which the nuclear non-proliferation regime is built. An attack by the largest nuclear weapon state in the world on a state that gave up its nuclear arsenal in exchange for security guarantees is only one dimension of the crisis. Another is the tremendous growth in the role of nuclear weapons in communications between world actors. Russia's nuclear blackmail of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), leading its members to deny direct military support for Ukraine, has restored the functions attributed to nuclear weapons, most notably the function of nuclear coercion. In the 21st century, Russia has become the showcase for how nuclear weapons are gradually changing their role from obsolete tools of conflict, which they were called after the end of the cold war, to inherent drivers of power projection and an umbrella that enables military interference by states in their 'spheres of influence'. This paper analyses the changing role of nuclear weapons in international security and defines new challenges for the arms control and non-proliferation regime.

On 24 February 2022, President of Russia Vladimir Putin announced a 'special operation' against Ukraine which quickly became a de facto full-scale war. In his television address dedicated to the start of the military action, Putin sent an intimidating message: 'for those who may be tempted to intervene in the ongoing events'....'Whoever tries to hinder us, or threaten our country or our people, should know that Russia's response will be immediate and will lead you to consequences that you have never faced in your history'.² Putin's words were widely interpreted as a direct reference to the possibility of Russia using nuclear weapons to 'de-escalate' the conflict by coercing any potential opponents eager to support Ukraine militarily. Three months later, the message was echoed by Russian Minister of Foreign Affairs Sergey Lavrov, who stressed the high likelihood of nuclear war, with NATO being 'the essence' by supplying weapons to Ukraine.³ The latter demonstrates a trend for Russia's threats of escalation to become an inherent part of the Kremlin's strategy. Based on Moscow's internal and external perceptions of itself and the world, Russian rhetoric is purposeful.

The internal perceptions stem from Russia's long-standing policy of 'escalation for de-escalation'. The first reference to the escalation strategy in the official Russian mindset appeared in 1999–2000, as an imminent reaction to the NATO bombing of Serbia during the Operation Allied Force. At the time, Russia was facing strong criticism for its Chechen wars, which highlighted the state's authoritarianism and revealed issues with minority suppression. Certain commonalities with the criticism that the Milosevic regime faced in Serbia encouraged Russia to prevent any similar NATO scenario on its soil. Amid a marked decrease in Moscow's political influence, such as its inability to stop NATO through use of its UN veto power, Russia deemed it necessary to ensure credible deterrence beyond the capacity of Russian conventional forces. Since 2000, Moscow has proclaimed the possibility of the use of nuclear weapons in conventional conflicts 'in critical circumstances' and emphasized the possibility of nuclear weapon use in regional wars.⁴ Since that time, nuclear escalation has been officially presented as the means of terminating conflicts 'on terms favourable to the Russian Federation'. The war against Georgia in 2008 and especially the so-called Ukraine conflict of 2014, which actually relied on Russian troops unofficially deployed in Donbas, have shown that Moscow still perceives the post-Soviet space as the sphere of its vital interests. The Russian annexation of Crimea in 2014 was partially the result of the fear of an increased NATO military presence on Russian borders. At the same

² Al Jazeera, "“No other option”: Excerpts of Putin's speech declaring war", 24 Feb. 2022, <<https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2022/2/24/putins-speech-declaring-war-on-ukraine-translated-excerpts>>.

³ Al Jazeera, 'Russia–Ukraine war: Lavrov warns on risk of nuclear conflict', 26 Apr. 2022, <<https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2022/4/26/russia-ukraine-war-lavrov-warns-of-risk-of-nuclear-conflict>>.

⁴ Ukaz Prezidenta Rossijskoj Federacii ot 21.04.2000 № 706 'Ob utverzhdenii Voennoj doktriny Rossijskoj Federacii' [Decree of the President of the Russian Federation no. 706 "On the approval of the Military Doctrine of the Russian Federation"], 21 Apr. 2020, <<http://www.kremlin.ru/acts/bank/15386>>.

time, the change of government in Ukraine was regarded as a US attempt at regime change. In addition, inside Russia Crimea's annexation was presented as a great political victory, and the need to retain the peninsula became one of the key tasks of the Russian military. All in all, this stimulated the coercive elements of Moscow's strategy, which aimed to show NATO that any military interference in Russian vital interests would have consequences.

In 2015, Putin stated that if the need arose, he was prepared to use nuclear weapons in the Crimea operation, playing the nuclear card to demonstrate to the West the irreversibility of the Crimean annexation.⁵ In 2020, publication of 'The Fundamentals of Russia's Nuclear Deterrence State Policy' strengthened this red line by making maintaining Russia's territorial integrity the main object of its nuclear deterrence.⁶ In earlier Russian military doctrines, nuclear weapon use was assigned to cases where Russia's existence was put in jeopardy or in response to the use of weapons of mass destruction against Russia. The context of territorial integrity first appeared after the annexation of Crimea in 2014 in comments by the Russian embassy in the United States about the possible use of nuclear weapons. The deterrence policy was the first document to set out Russia's nuclear deterrence principles and red lines. In practice, it made the inclusion of Crimea in the Russian nuclear deterrence perimeter a fait accompli. Moreover, the main message permanently transmitted to the West was the irrevocable nature of Russian territorial integrity, updated with Crimea, and its vital interests (including in the post-Soviet space).

The external dimension was reflected in President Biden's recent statement made on the eve of the war, in which he stressed that the USA would not support Ukraine with military forces, citing a possible nuclear war with Russia as his main concern. On 27 February, Putin reiterated his nuclear threat, declaring that he had put Russia's nuclear deterrent forces on high alert.⁷ On 2 March, in an interview given to Al-Jazeera, Lavrov warned that 'World War III will be a devastating nuclear war', sending NATO a further signal to stay away from providing direct military support to Ukraine.⁸ This strategy of active nuclear coercion was directed at dissuading the USA from providing assistance to Ukraine with setting up a no-fly zone, which Kyiv had been asking for persistently at the time. Moreover, the USA responded in the way Moscow anticipated. The White House publicly reiterated its intention not to interfere directly in the Russia-Ukraine conflict and cancelled a deal planned for Poland to supply Ukraine with Soviet-era MIG aircraft in exchange for the US F-16s.⁹ In addition, the US postponed a test-flight of an intercontinental ballistic missile (ICBM) to avoid it being interpreted by Russia as a provocative step.¹⁰ Such actions clearly demonstrated to Moscow that its heavy reliance on nuclear deterrence was justified. Unlike its conventional plans and operations, which proved a huge overestimate of the Russian army's capabilities, the power of nuclear weapons was estimated correctly. Moreover, the US intelligence services do not currently exclude the use of Russian nuclear weapons in the war with Ukraine, although they have not seen any preparations by the Kremlin for such actions. Such

⁵ 'Putin: "my byli gotovy" primenit' yadernoe oruzhie iz-za Kryma' [Putin: 'we were ready' to use nuclear weapons over Crimea]. BBC, 15 Mar 2015, <https://www.bbc.com/ukrainian/ukraine_in_russian/2015/03/150315_ru_s_putin_documentary_crimea>.

⁶ Ukaz Prezidenta Rossijskoj Federacii no. 355 'Ob osnovah gosudarstvennoj politiki Rossijskoj Federacii v oblasti yadernogo sderzhivaniya' [Decree of the President of the Russian Federation 'On the Fundamentals of the State Policy of the Russian Federation in the Field of Nuclear Deterrence'], 2 June 2020,

<<http://static.kremlin.ru/media/events/files/ru/lluTKhAiabLzOBjifBSvu4q3bcl7AXd7.pdf>>.

⁷ Rothe, A. et al., 'Putin signals escalation as he puts Russia's nuclear force on high alert', *The Guardian*, 27 Feb. 2022, <<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/feb/27/vladimir-putin-puts-russia-nuclear-deterrence-forces-on-high-alert-ukraine>>.

⁸ Joffre, T., 'Russian FM Warns World War 3 will be "devastating nuclear war"', *Jerusalem Post*, 2 Mar. 2022, <<https://www.jpost.com/international/article-699089>>.

⁹ Borger, J. and Wintour, P., 'US dismisses Polish plan to provide fighter jets to be sent to Ukraine', *The Guardian*, 8 Mar. 2022, <<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/mar/08/poland-mig-29-jets-us-ukraine>>.

¹⁰ Stewart, P. and Idrees Ali, 'Exclusive: US cancels ICBM test due to Russia nuclear tensions', *Reuters*, 1 Apr. 2022, <<https://www.reuters.com/business/aerospace-defense/exclusive-us-cancels-icbm-test-due-russia-nuclear-tensions-2022-04-01/>>.

considerations could lay the ground for two scenarios for the use of nuclear weapons. Both appear unlikely, as their main consequences would be major reputational loss for Russia in the international arena and the risk of losing the support of China and other states that still have trade relations with Moscow. Even the most pessimistic scenarios must be considered, however, as they are capable of threatening the current international order and the regime set out in the 1968 Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (Non-Proliferation Treaty, NPT).

Scenario 1. Russian nuclear weapon use against Ukraine

As Fiona Hill put it: ‘Every time you think: “No, he wouldn’t, would he?” Well, yes, he would. And he wants us to know that, of course’.¹¹ Russia’s favoured way to justify its actions is to compare them with something that has already been done by the USA, such as the aggression against Ukraine with direct reference to the Serbia operation of 1999 and the liberation of Kosovo. The Kremlin could therefore potentially authorize a limited nuclear strike in Ukraine by referring to the Hiroshima and Nagasaki nuclear bombardments. This is a highly unlikely scenario but in as much as Moscow compares its aggression against Ukraine with US military operations against Serbia or Iraq, or NATO operations against Libya, it might seek to justify the use of nuclear weapons with the argument that the USA did something similar against Japan, so Russia would not be doing anything unprecedented. The aim of coercing Ukraine to make peace on Russia’s terms would not be achieved through such actions, but there is a low level of probability nonetheless. This probability, however, will be critical for the international order because it will ultimately demonstrate the ability or inability of nuclear weapons to force states to bend to an adversary’s terms.

Many states might consider this aspect of unlimited power projection an additional benefit of developing and maintaining nuclear weapons in addition to the other benefits already shown by Russia, where nuclear weapons serve as an umbrella for starting an unprovoked conventional war against its neighbour. The ‘unauthorized’ or random use of tactical nuclear weapons might also be considered. This theoretical possibility demonstrates one of the grave consequences of the collapse of arms control, as well as its general loopholes in controlling dual-capable weapons. In particular, the lack of controls over nuclear-tipped cruise missiles could become a problem in the near future.

In Russia’s war against Ukraine, most of the cruise and ballistic missiles used by Moscow are dual-capable and their warheads are not overseen by any external actor.¹² The general obscurity of Russian decision-making mechanisms together with the permanent juggling with nuclear threats do not exclude the possibility of nuclear-tipped missile use against Ukraine

In this regard, there can be different pretexts: a ‘mistaken’ use against Ukrainian cities under the pretext of hitting military infrastructure or a ‘special operation’ against ‘Ukraine’s nuclear programme’, which Russian propaganda has invented as one of the pretexts for invading Ukraine. This might be presented in a similar way to the Bucha case, where massacres of Ukrainians have not been recognized by the Russian authorities. Besides, Russia has demonstrated that ruining Ukrainian cities despite all civilian casualties is one of its strategies in the war with Ukraine, so, considering the fast missiles depletion the nuclear use may ease this task for Russian authorities. The main purpose besides coercing Ukraine to surrender would be to demonstrate to NATO that any deepening support for Ukraine would have nuclear consequences. At the same

¹¹ Reynolds, M., “‘Yes, he would’: Fiona Hill on Putin and nukes”, Politico, 28 Feb. 2022, <<https://www.politico.com/news/magazine/2022/02/28/world-war-iii-already-there-00012340>>.

¹² More than 1300 by mid-April 2022. Mankov, S., ‘Rosiyksi rakety proty Ukrainy: sho vono take, chym nebezpechni i koly skinchatsya?’ [Russian missiles used against Ukraine: What are they? Why are they so dangerous and when will they end?], 10 Apr. 2022, <<https://762project.org/2022/04/10/when-russian-missiles-gonna-end/>>.

time, such actions seem even less likely than the second scenario, in which Russia sanctions the use of nuclear weapons against NATO.

Scenario 2. Russian nuclear weapon use against NATO

This scenario has a slightly higher level of probability than the previous one, which is still very low but cannot be completely excluded. Traditional assessments of Russian strategic culture suggest that Moscow is not inclined to attack a power it considers strong, but prefers to run low risks with those it believes to be weaker, such as Ukraine. However, the rationality of Russian strategic thinking in the war against Ukraine should be questioned. The war was initially based on two significant misperceptions: an underestimation of Ukraine's military capabilities and an overestimation of its own. Given the fact that nuclear coercion is the only thing that has unmistakably worked, it is worth considering that its value might be overestimated by President Putin who is famous for his trust in the power of nuclear weapons. So, if it is suggested that Ukraine should not persist with the war while Western countries continue to refrain from joining the conflict, President Putin, blinded by Russian nuclear coercive capabilities, might be encouraged in his attempts to restore the Soviet Union's cold war borders. It is important to remember that Putin considers the collapse of the Soviet Union to be the biggest tragedy of the 20th century, and the aggression towards Ukraine is a clear step in this direction. He could declare the Baltic states new targets for future 'special operations', which would not be surprising as in 2015 the Russian parliament asked the General Prosecutor to challenge the legitimacy of the Baltic states' independence as it had done previously in the case of Crimea.¹³ Such nuclear blackmail would probably have two consequences.

First, if the United States supports its NATO allies but Moscow does not perceive this as a sufficient signal of US resolve. The military operation against Ukraine is mostly based on the misperceptions of the Russian authorities: of Ukraine and its army, of the Russian army and of the reaction of the international community. It is therefore possible that Moscow might keep making its nuclear threats in the mistaken belief that the USA would step back. As a result, the Kremlin might resort to low level nuclear use to demonstrate its determination. Such a situation would inevitably raise the conflict to the US-Russian level with a degree of probability of escalation to the nuclear stage. Of course, the effectiveness of Russian coercive threats should not be overestimated, such as their influence on NATO member states' behaviour in supplying weapons to Ukraine. This aspect of nuclear coercion has been the least effective due to the low level of credibility of the Russian nuclear threat in response to NATO's indirect involvement in the war.

Second, if the USA were to stand idly by, then the existence of NATO as a viable organization would be called into question. Such a situation could call into question the sustainability of the entire international order. However, there is very little reason to believe that the USA would refrain from a direct conflict between Russia and NATO. Nonetheless, Russia's overestimation of its own nuclear coercion potential can still be considered a possibility.

Conclusions

As a direct result of the Kremlin's active nuclear coercion policy, unlike Serbia in 1999, Russia will probably never be faced with an international coalition defending Ukraine by military means. Aggravated by events during the Russian invasion, this may have direct consequences for the international order and the entire NPT

¹³ Gosdume, V., 'RF hotiat peresmotret pravomernost priznaniya nexavisimosti stran Baltii' [Russian State Duma wants to review the legitimacy of the Baltic states' independence], 16 June 2015, <https://zn.ua/WORLD/v-gosdume-rf-hotyat-peresmotret-pravomernost-priznaniya-nezavisimosti-stran-baltii-179641_.html>.

regime. The early months of Russia's conflict with Ukraine have already exhibited tendencies that could negatively affect the international system.

First, Russian actions and misperceptions have meant that nuclear weapons turned out to be the only reliable tool that Moscow could rely on. The ability to force European and NATO countries to deny active military help to Ukraine has demonstrated that nuclear weapons carry strong coercive power, and can be regarded as a political tool for power projection and serve as an umbrella for states planning conventional aggression within their 'sphere of influence'. In particular, any state with a nuclear weapons program and offensive plans could be inspired by Russia's offensive war against Ukraine. In particular, Iran might consider developing nuclear weapons to enable its interference in Middle East conflicts, while North Korea will probably never agree to any future deal to give up its nuclear weapons. In the meantime, China might learn lessons on how to resolve the Taiwan issue using nuclear coercion as an umbrella for its invasion plans. Moreover, the question of the security assurances provided to states in exchange for eliminating their nuclear weapon programs seems to be completely deadlocked: the collapse of the Budapest Memorandum assurances and the attack by the biggest nuclear weapon state on a state denied a nuclear arsenal has become a negative showcase for Iran, North Korea and any other potential proliferators. There could also be many other examples, so an increase in the number of states challenging the NPT regime with attempts to develop nuclear weapons might be expected, as well as an increase in the number of states attempting to resolve their territorial claims using the nuclear coercion and the umbrella function of their nuclear arsenals.

Second, such a tendency will inevitably not only affect the viability of the NPT regime, but also aggravate the split between nuclear proliferators and supporters of the Treaty on Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons (TPNW). On the one hand, the political usefulness of nuclear weapons, as demonstrated by Russia, could inspire states with military nuclear programmes and territorial ambitions to pursue them further. On the other hand, the fact of the largest nuclear state attacking a state that has abandoned nuclear weapons could lead non-nuclear liberal states to strengthen the TPNW, which officially bans nuclear deterrence strategy and any coercive actions based on it. This could result in the collapse of the NPT, which has already been undermined by proliferation tendencies, and increase the legitimacy of the TPNW. The worst outcome would be a widening split between the supporters of the NPT and those of the TPNW, making the aim of a nuclear-free world unrealizable.

Third, unlimited use of dual-capable missiles by Russia against Ukraine makes the revival of arms control the urgent goal of the international community in the immediate future. A ban on nuclear-tipped intermediate range missiles becomes the urgent task of the INF Treaty 2.0, which was high on the agenda before Russia attacked Ukraine, but the prospects for which now appear bleak. The unreliability of the Russian authorities and their negotiating positions undermine the possibility of any future talks. Moreover, for the first time in the nearly 50 years of US-Russia dialogue, which has remained the pillar of all arms control initiatives, dialogue appears impossible, at least in the foreseeable future.

In sum, it is worth noting that the current conflict between Russia and Ukraine has significantly increased the role of nuclear weapons in international politics and therefore aggravated the situation within the NPT regime. This could result in dramatic changes that affect the role of the NPT and the TPNW in the international order. The situation is dynamic and it is reasonable to believe that the tendencies mentioned above could be exacerbated or defused by new events, and the actions and reactions of the Russian authorities and their US/NATO counterparts.



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