SCEEUS GUEST REPORT
NO. 3, 2024

SCEEUS STOCKHOLM CENTRE FOR EASTERN EUROPEAN STUDIES

Fear and Laughter at Russia's Attempts at Nuclear Blackmail in Ukraine

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28 June 2024

Executive Summary

The prospects of a nuclear escalation in Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine have had a significant impact on western public perceptions and practical policies on assisting Ukraine throughout the war. The discussion of "red lines" implies a static policy of deterrence on the Russian side that if crossed, would trigger escalation. However, the opposite is true. Russia's nuclear weapons have long been more of an instrument of compellence than deterrence. How useful they are in this respect depends on Russia's ability to shape the informational, political and conventional-military circumstances in which attempts at compellence take place. If Russia believes it has the upper hand in these domains, its nuclear assertiveness grows. If it does not, however, or the West has degraded its ability to do so, the Kremlin must watch the West transgress its "red lines" with impunity. Hence. instead of being hamstrung by the fear of escalation, western policymakers should work to shape a non-permissive environment for Russia's threats.

Background

At the start of the full-scale invasion of Ukraine, Putin stated that countries that dared to interfere would face "consequences … never seen in your entire history". Shortly after, he put Russia's nuclear forces on a "special mode of readiness", puzzling the international audience – and his nuclear forces – about what this actually meant. There are also strong indications that Russia used nuclear threats in closed bilateral communications to dissuade western states from providing various forms of support to Ukraine: the supply of long-range strike weapons, combat aircraft and armoured fighting vehicles of a certain kind.

Fear of escalation often arises in public debates and seems to have had a certain influence on political decision making. Indeed, most military analysts before the war had warned that Russia would use its nuclear arsenal to peel off international support from an isolated victim, and to steer escalation towards outcomes favourable to its aims. Nuclear deterrence in the Russian mindset was always more about coercion and compellence than about deterrence (in the western sense) and security. Few thought that Russia would decrease its reliance on nuclear weapons and nuclear threats for escalation control.

Before the full-scale invasion, those who warned that Russia's aggressive policies rest on nuclear threats were not taken seriously. Such warnings were often dismissed as bureaucratic politics by defence officials to justify the modernisation of their respective national nuclear or conventional arsenals. It came as a shock to some that, in the wake of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, many of the same experts that before the February 2024 warned of Russia's aggressive nuclear policy were calling on them to ignore Russia's nuclear threats and provide Ukraine with the weapon systems it needed, despite the Kremlin's covert and overt threats of escalation.

Many decision makers find it hard to judge Russia's nuclear intentions because Moscow's declared nuclear policy – set out in its military doctrine of 2014 and specified in the state principles of nuclear deterrence of 2020 – is highly flexible. While the military doctrine looks

defensive on the surface, non-transparent manoeuvres practicing the offensive, aggressive forward deployment of carrier means, and often overly gung-ho political discourse (which is irrelevant in the final analysis), speak an entirely different language. This is not helped by the problem that most European politicians ignored issues of nuclear deterrence and compellence before the war and played down Russia's aggressive military posture and ambitions. Now they are overcompensating for past mistakes with current caution.

Russian Nuclear Policy

If one thing is certain about Russia's nuclear policy, it is that nuclear weapons are an integral element of a comprehensive policy, and their use and usability are always contingent on the overall political and military situation. Depending on the circumstances, a threat might be serious in one situation and a bluff in another. The Kremlin's political and military thinking is also offensive in nature. Rather than worrying about potential losses, the Kremlin seeks to exploit offensive opportunities where they fall. Hence, in moments of perceived strength, Russia is more vocal with its nuclear threats, while in moments of perceived weakness it remains surprisingly silent. Despite Russia-NATO relations reaching a new low in 1999 over the Kosovo intervention, there was little sabre rattling at the time. Forward deployment and offensive manoeuvres became a thing of the 2010s. When Russian capabilities started to improve, its assertiveness increased. This is difficult if not impossible to comprehend for defensive-minded westerners, who often assume that it should be the other way round.

When Putin started his invasion, he relied on several factors and considerations that made him think he was acting from a position of strength. For reasons of simplicity, I group these as four factors:

An imbalance of values: In talks with western interlocuters, Russian officials often stated that Ukraine was more important – even vital – to Russia than it was to the West. In their colonial mindset, they perceived all post-Maidan governments in Ukraine as western sponsored if not mere puppets of the West, with little or no backing among the local population. They thought that the West would abandon these elites if the costs of maintaining contacts were too high. The US withdrawal from Afghanistan, and the particularly humiliating way in which it took place, certainly reinforced the perception in Moscow that at some point the West would just cut its losses and go. Raising the stakes by issuing a nuclear threat might accelerate this.

Russia remained a multi-domain threat to the West: Moscow only committed its high readiness battalion tactical groups to the full-scale invasion in the initial phase of operations. The 175,000–190,000 strong invasion force comprised not only ground forces, but also airborne soldiers, special forces and naval infantry, and was supplemented by national guard units to perform occupation tasks. This left a sizable proportion of Russian ground forces (at least half, albeit manned with conscripts) in Russia, which could still respond to a conventional escalation with the West. Russia was overly optimistic regarding what its conventional strike campaign could achieve in Ukraine. Its initial attacks on Ukrainian military facilities (command and control nodes, air defence and air force installations, ammunition and fuel depots and other logistical infrastructure) fell short. Only in October 2022 did Russia gear up the missile war once again, by expending most of its stored conventional long-range strike means. At the beginning of the war, however, Moscow still had a large conventional missile arsenal to threaten or strike other targets should it need to. Hence, if western support

for Ukraine entered an escalatory spiral, Putin was confident he had the means to manage it – both conventional and nuclear. This gave him the confidence to pursue the path of blackmail, but even then in a not too public manner in case he needed to walk back from it.

The "special military operation" was intended to be too quick to cause uproar beyond the West: It is obvious that Russia did not prepare for a long war and thought of the special military operation as a robust repetition of Operation Danube (the occupation of Czechoslovakia in 1968) or the initial intervention in Afghanistan in 1979. The West would protest, that was a given, but large parts of the rest of international society would remain silent. In reality, China, India, South Africa and Brazil, as well as other key political and trading partners, sat on the fence and watched things unfold. In votes in the UN General Assembly, they largely abstained, neither seconding resolutions nor condemning Russia's initial nuclear threat. In such an environment, where the world was stunned and had not yet made up its mind, a Russian nuclear escalation would also be part of the new facts created on the ground. Russia also used information operations to shape public opinion in these countries, creating a permissive environment for escalation control.

Options would improve for Moscow and become binary for the West: Even if the war lasted longer, Moscow had little doubt about winning. As the war progressed, the conditions for Ukraine would worsen consistently. Under pressure on various axes, shortages of ammunition would soon make resistance difficult for Kyiv. Progress with the land campaign would free more Russian frontline troops for other endeavours, while Rosgvardia would take over the occupation tasks. Hence, Russia would become even more dangerous to the West and have even more options for escalation in other theatres, thereby compelling the West to give up. On the other hand, the dwindling chances of a Ukrainian army fightback would give the West a binary choice: full intervention on Kyiv's side or quit. In this case, the risk-averse West was expected to quit.

Russian Weaknesses

Hence, in the initial stages of the full-scale invasion, Putin thought he was in a good position to control escalation. He had the initiative and the means to control escalation, and the situation should get better by the day. In such a scenario, nuclear weapons are a good tool for intimidating the West and limiting its reaction. Russia could fine-tune escalation by probing conventionally and stepping up the nuclear rhetoric if needed.

However, contrary to Putin's expectations, things did not go well from there. Indeed, all four pillars of Russia's initial escalation dominance turned into their opposite: Russian weakness.

The reaction of western societies to the full-scale invasion was overwhelming solidarity: In many countries, Russia's agents of influence who spread the Kremlin's lies of a civil war and that the West was at fault for the escalation were no longer accepted as experts by the public, and were forced to move to fringe media, explain themselves or desist. In most European countries and the US, the wider public supported the arming of Ukraine and gave politicians a mandate to do so. While Russian nuclear threats still served as a useful tool for limiting weapon deliveries and intimidating elites, it was hard to make a point about a disparity of values, especially after the start of the invasion.

Russian got bogged down in Ukraine: Its increase in force numbers from roughly 170,000 or 190,000 men at the beginning of the war to over 500,000 in 2024 meant trouble for Ukraine, but also a sort of relief for the West. With its land forces bogged down in Ukraine, there is no force left to react to any other contingency. Key areas bordering NATO, such as the Finnish-Russian border or Kaliningrad, have been almost emptied of land forces and air defence assets. Those that remain conduct training but are not realistically able to perform combat tasks. Russia's arsenal of dual-use capable long-range strike means has been heavily depleted in Ukraine. The missiles used in recent Russian strike campaigns come straight from the production line. This is of course a sizable threat to strategic infrastructure in Ukraine but utterly insufficient to put NATO at risk of sizable conventional strikes. Even worse for Russia, large swaths of S-300 surface-to-air missiles have been fired at Ukrainian cities and targets. These missiles are still the backbone of fleet and airbase protection of the Russian Navy and Aerospace forces. Not only does NATO now outgun Russia in conventional cruise missiles, but Russia has also fired many of the interceptors needed to defend itself. In case of a wider confrontation, NATO would be able to dominate any escalation. It could mount significant conventional attacks on Russia that would cripple the Russian military without resorting to nuclear weapons, and still have a nuclear arsenal as back-up.

China made up its mind: The war has also lasted long enough to make other countries' positions clear on what to think about a Russian nuclear strike. For Moscow, the most important opinion is that of Xi Jinping, as Russia is increasingly dependent on Chinese benevolence and support. While Beijing provides the financial, technical and defence-industrial support to keep the Russian conventional war machine up and running, China does not approve of a Russian nuclear release, and is not a particular fan of Russia's nuclear sabre-rattling. The reasons for this lie in Chinese self-interest. Beijing is surrounded by capable threshold states: first and foremost South Korea and Japan, but Taiwan has also thought about a nuclear deterrent in the past. Russia conquering a non-nuclear state by exploiting its nuclear monopoly would send shockwaves through the international system, particularly in East Asia. Ignoring Beijing's interest would come at a cost Russia cannot risk.

Western options for retaliation have widened: Instead of being pushed into a binary take it or leave it situation, the West today has multiple options for punishing Russia through Ukraine, even without putting its own soldiers or territory at risk. Ukraine has mastered the use of multiple western weapon systems, including the use of British and French cruise missiles fired from Ukrainian aircraft. Thus far, the West has put significant restrictions on Ukraine regarding strikes on Russian territory, but such restrictions could be further eased if the need arises. All this adds to the multiple conventional options for the West to react to a Russian escalation, while on the other hand the commitment of the mass of Russia's ground troops to the war in Ukraine and the expenditure of ammunition have severely curtailed Russia's options for reacting to a serious escalation with the West. In case of a confrontation between NATO and Russia over Ukraine, Moscow now faces the choice of either risking all out nuclear war or backing down, in which case backing down is the logical choice.

So, while Russia's nuclear threats cannot be dismissed out of hand, they should not be seen out of context. Nuclear threats and their credibility are dependent on the overall political, informational and conventional-military situation. Sometimes they are intended to signal true resolve, but often they are bluff.

In the autumn of 2022, Russia was in an extremely weak position and could do nothing but watch the West slowly cross its previously set red lines. Unfortunately, the West only did so slowly and in a piecemeal way. Whether red lines were actively communicated by the Kremlin (often in classified calls) or just imagined by Western politicians (if I do X, Moscow might snap), western governments failed to understand the dynamic nature of such red lines – that their credibility is contingent on power factors and the will to escalate that underlines them. In the final analysis, Moscow lacked the capability to enforce any of them because it could not do so without facing the risk of starting an escalation it lacked the means to control. Hence, contrary to belief and rumour, Russia did not start preparation for a nuclear strike in the autumn of 2022.

Western Weaknesses

In fact, if anything has increased the chances of a Russian nuclear release it is western weakness and indecisiveness. The blocking of aid in the US, and domestic political battles spilling anti-Ukrainian prejudices into the open have left the impression that the US is less serious and united about its support for Ukraine. European reluctance to step out of the US shadow could have fostered the impression in Moscow that nuclear threats work against non-nuclear states and it might be productive to have another try. Ukraine's military weakness due to a lack of ammunition, surface-to-air missiles and fighters could award Russia success on the battlefield that frees up assets to threaten others. Finally, the looming US elections and shrinking poll numbers for President Biden might undermine the credibility of Washington's threat to conventionally retaliate against Russian forces in Ukraine.

Unsurprisingly, Russia's perceived own strength and western weakness emboldened Putin to again play the nuclear card to intimidate and influence discussions in the West. On 6 May, the Russian Ministry of Defence announced drills involving "non-strategic nuclear weapons" in the vicinity of Ukraine "in response" to French and British statements hinting at a possible expansion of their support for Ukraine. Belarus immediately made similar announcements to underline that such weapons were now in place in the country.

Of course, the threat is more of a bluff than substance. Russia's non-strategic nuclear strike means (land-launched Iskander M and Iskander K, sea-launched Kalibr, Zirkon and Oniks, and air-launched Kh-55/101, Kinzhal) are all dual-capable and embedded in Russia's conventional force structure. Their conventional variants are used in the daily strike campaigns against Ukrainian civilian infrastructure and constantly "exercised". However, the exercise grabbed public attention on systems deployed anyway, provided an opportunity to showcase them and led once again to the West guessing what Moscow was up to. Nonetheless, no live nuclear warheads have been removed from storage.

Policy Implications for the West

For the West, and particularly Europe, to hedge against Russia's nuclear blackmail, it must act from a position of strength. Counterintuitively, weakness creates exploitable situations while strength contains Moscow's ability to control escalation. Instead of communicating restraint, *Besonnenheit* and fear of escalation, thereby providing a feedback loop to Moscow that blackmail works, before each and every major decision, determination and firmness

should command our vocabulary. Increased military support for Ukraine will ensure that Russian armed forces are bogged down and diminished as a conventional threat. A healthy dose of ambiguity on western military support for Ukraine makes it difficult for Moscow to anticipate possible consequences. At the very least, limits and restrictions should never be communicated to Russia, so that the Kremlin has to worry about and fear both direct and indirect means of retaliation. Finally, improving both Ukraine's and the West's conventional strike power, including deep strike means, improves our capabilities to hold Russia at risk, both directly (through the threat of a western response to a nuclear strike) and indirectly by enabling Ukraine to strike Russia.

This can be done regardless of the nuclear status of the country or its position in NATO's nuclear sharing arrangements. Like Russia's nuclear options, NATO's overall deterrence credibility rests not only on its nuclear, but also on its conventional capabilities, and the anticipated skill and determination to use both of them. On the latter two issues, all NATO members could act to improve the West's overall deterrence posture. That alone would not fully substitute a firmer US stance on Russian nuclear signalling, which will not come before the election, but it would help.

Finally, Europeans need to consider that Russia will learn lessons from the practicability of nuclear blackmail in the war against Ukraine and apply them to future conflicts. If nuclear sabre-rattling is perceived as a practical means of dividing the alliance and limiting response to Moscow's imperialist adventures, Europe must look ahead to a troublesome future as Russian neo-imperialist ambitions are unlikely to be restricted to Ukraine.

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