

## NUCLEAR RHETORIC ESCALATION AND RISKS OF MISCALCULATION IN UKRAINE

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*Russia's invasion of Ukraine has exposed how close a nuclear escalation, or a nuclear war can be. While the majority of military, intelligence, and nuclear weapons' observers believe that the use of a tactical nuclear weapon by Russia remains incredibly unlikely, they also agree that a further escalation of the war could lead to unpredictable developments. Most importantly, potential nuclear weapons use in Ukraine is just one of the nuclear dangers that we should be concerned about.*

Just a couple of days into the war in Ukraine, Russian President Vladimir Putin publicly put Russian nuclear forces on a higher state of alert, signaling the Kremlin's ability to escalate if wanted. Since then, the nuclear warnings have been used by Russia on various occasions to remind the United States and NATO that if they get too involved in the conflict Moscow could use any means at its disposal with catastrophic consequences. Lately though, at the Valdai Discussion Club held on October 27, President Putin **denied** having any intentions of using nuclear weapons in Ukraine. Speaking at the conference, Putin said that it is pointless for Russia to strike Ukraine: "There is no point in that, neither political nor military". He added that the previous warnings of his readiness to use "all means available to protect Russia" were merely a response to Western statements about their possible use of nuclear weapons.

While most of the military and nuclear arms experts cannot rule out the use of these weapons in Ukraine, they tend to agree that the actual likelihood of such a move is very low. Intelligence-wise there are no signs that Putin is preparing for any use of nuclear weapons. Militarily, Russia does not have trained troops that could take advantage of a tactical nuclear weapon strike. In other words, **military experts do not see a battlefield advantage to use any nuclear armament**. From the strategic point of view, nuclear signaling seems to be less about real planning and more about deterring the West from expending its help to Ukraine.

At this stage of the war, Russia might be trying to discourage the United States from sending advanced weapons systems to Ukraine, like the Army Tactical Missile System, a longer-range weaponry known as ATACMS. Michael McFaul, a former US Ambassador to Russia and a scholar, **told**

the *New York Times* that Putin was achieving already a practical military objective just by talking about nuclear weapons: “The Biden administration has supplied Ukraine with billions of dollars in weapons, which have changed the course of the war, but it has held off giving Kyiv longer-range missiles, tanks and fighter planes. They are being deterred by Putin.”

Some are still tempted to conclude that nuclear deterrence works arguing that NATO’s nuclear restraint has limited Russia’s ‘military operation’ exclusively to the territory of Ukraine. We should emphasize that for Russia, the possession of nuclear weapons not only enabled Moscow to invade Ukraine but also helped to prevent a direct NATO’s military involvement. Vladimir Putin might have never invaded Ukraine if Moscow did not have nuclear weapons as a backup. Besides, no one can foresee consequences of further military escalation, sabotage operations involving attacks on critical infrastructure, or accidental destruction of a nuclear plant. In truth, the NATO allies have been walking the fine line between providing military support to Ukraine and not provoking a NATO conflict with Russia.

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The risk of miscalculation with nuclear forces pointed at each other by two major nuclear powers remains high. A wide range of military operations conducted at the time of increased tensions could easily lead to misperceptions or mistakes. A nuclear drill (Steadfast Noon) recently conducted by NATO could be considered problematic in the sense of nuclear signaling, despite its routine nature. Russia has also notified its intention to conduct a routine nuclear exercise (Grom), which might involve launching of intercontinental ballistic missiles, as it did in the past. In a similar way, the sabotage operations, and attacks on critical infrastructure such as explosions destroying Nord Stream 1 and 2 gas pipelines, or the Crimean Bridge, could lead to significant escalation. Most recently, Russia threatened to strike Western commercial satellites that are helping Ukraine to counter the invasion. This threat has also raised concerns among space lawyers and industry executives about the safety of objects in orbit. Such a strike could severely escalate tensions between Russia and the United States.

The danger of nuclear weapons’ use has been looming over Ukraine since the beginning of the Russian invasion. However, the possible use of nuclear arms in Ukraine is just one of the nuclear risks that has emerged from Russia’s war. Unfortunately, some states might see new incentives to get their own weapons, others might consider the use of civilian nuclear-power plants as tools for terror too. All these developments are happening against the backdrop of a new nuclear arms race and a near collapse of arms

control agreements. The Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI), which assesses the current state of armaments, disarmament, and international security, indicates in the recently published [Yearbook 2022](#) that global nuclear arsenals are expected to grow as states continue to modernize.

Addressing the nuclear dangers emerging from Russia's war in Ukraine will require new ways of thinking. The main questions remain unanswered: How to move forward and to make the security environment more conducive to arms control? What conditions would be required to come back to strategic and stability talks? The United States and NATO will need to balance the need to support Ukraine, with the prevention of a nuclear conflict, while seeking a diplomatic end to the war. Recently, there might be some signs that Russia is softening its nuclear rhetoric over Ukraine. The latest statement published on [the Russian Foreign Ministry website on November 2](#), stated that: "Russia is strictly and consistently guided by the tenet that a nuclear war cannot be won and must never be fought". The statement added that Russian nuclear doctrine was unambiguous, pursued solely defensive goals and did not allow for "expansive interpretation". The statement also included an appeal for talks about security guarantees that Russia had demanded of NATO before it invaded Ukraine in February. We can only hope that this measured statement signals lowering of the nuclear rhetoric and provides an opening to work with the Kremlin to reduce nuclear threats and nuclear arsenals in the future. With all the signs that post-Cold war decline in nuclear arsenals is ending, we should remember that as long as nuclear weapons exist a nuclear war is a constant danger. Based on the treaty on the prohibition of nuclear weapons (TPNW), non-nuclear weapon states and civil society should continue to stigmatize the possession, threats of use, and any use of nuclear weapons as illegal and immoral.