Apocalypse (not) now, or Russian nuclear threats in Ukraine. Part 1

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Almost exactly sixty years ago, in October 1962, the Cuban crisis took place. Speaking on Thursday 6th October, at a meeting with donors supporting the Democratic party's campaign for the Congressional by-elections, President Biden stated that "For the first time since the Cuban Missile Crisis, we have a direct threat to the use of nuclear weapons, if in fact things continue down the path they'd been going." It is worth noting that Biden was referring not to situations where a nuclear weapon could be used in the course of an unintentional escalation (i.e., for example, during the Able Archer '83 exercise), but as a result of structural factors.

Biden stated that he "knows Vladimir Putin very well," adding that the president of the Russian Federation isn't bluffing when he talks about the potential use of tactical nuclear, chemical or biological weapons, especially in the face of weakness demonstrated by the Russian Armed Forces on the battlefield. This, in turn, means that the US is "facing difficult decisions regarding the conflict in Ukraine" — and although the US "will continue to support Kyiv", it "must consider the way out" of the conflict for Russia. What way can Putin choose, which "off-ramp," leading to further escalation to end the conflict, so that "not only does he not lose face but also does not lose power in Russia?" It is worth noting that — at least inferring from public statements — Biden is less anxious about Russia's strategic situation and more about Vladimir Putin's individual calculations regarding his maintenance of his political position. This is an important remark because, in this author's view, it is difficult to find a strategic justification for Russia's use of nuclear weapons at the present stage of the conflict. It does not seem that this could help Russia achieve any political success with regard to the war in Ukraine: in some extreme cases, it is possible to imagine that Russia "wins the war" as a result of the use of nuclear weapons — but it is very difficult to sketch out a scenario in which the Kremlin thus wins the peace.

Threats of asymmetric escalation with the use of nuclear weapons have accompanied Russian policy not only since the beginning of the war in Ukraine nor its aggression against that country in 2014, but have been formulated, more or less formally, since the country's inception as the heir to the USSR. In a way, they reflect the Kremlin's awareness of its conventional weakness vis-a-vis NATO. As such, they are a canonical example of the behaviour of a state facing a potential adversary with greater conventional capabilities. It is worth remembering that a doctrine employing similar mechanics was NATO's *flexible response* doctrine. As argued by Kofman and Fink, the emphasis placed by the Russian Federation on the role of nuclear weapons in managing escalation has decreased with the growth of conventional capabilities

— but remains an integral part of it. So although, as Kofman and Fink argue, the threshold of using NSNW (non-strategic nuclear weapons) has been moved to the higher ranks of the escalation ladder, related to an attempt to end a conflict on a regional scale, they remain present in Russian thinking — and, equally importantly, in Russian strategic communication towards the West. It is quite clear that if Russia decided to use nuclear weapons in Ukraine, it would use non-strategic nuclear weapons in the first place. For the sake of simplification, let's assume that for the first use in the course of the war in Ukraine, Russia would not use the resources (warheads and means of delivery) included in the last armament-restricting treaty in force, i.e. New START. Thus, the resources, land, sea and air, which together make up Russia's strategic nuclear triad, would not be used. In addition to the strategic nuclear triad, however, Russia also has resources that in practice form a "non-strategic nuclear triad," consisting of land and sea bases and carried on board aircraft.

Just before the outbreak of the war, on 19th February, the Russians conducted tests of hypersonic missiles. Three days after its outbreak, Vladimir Putin announced that the nuclear forces of the Russian Federation had been put on high readiness. In the following months, a number of former and current representatives of the Russian administration (including Dmitry Medvedev, Sergey Lavrov, Ramzan Kadyrov and Russia's ambassador to the United Kingdom, Andrei Kelin) suggested that the Kremlin might use nuclear weapons. And while these statements raised concerns in the West — and were widely discussed — they did not change the course of US policy, nor did they catalyse speeches like Joe Biden's. Recent weeks have brought a revival of the discussion on the potential of escalating the conflict in Ukraine to the level of the use of nuclear weapons. We’ve seen referenda carried out by Russia and the subsequent annexation of part of Ukraine, the effective counter-offensive activities carried out by the Ukrainians and the increasingly clear lack of a realistic theory of victory of the Russian forces, plus the actions of Moscow corresponding to this, notably the mobilisation announced on 21st September, which is perceived by some as a breach of a kind of social contract with Russian society: "you do not interfere in our affairs (you do not get involved in political life), we do not interfere in yours (state interference in social life of citizens)."

The logic behind the Russians' behaviour seems simple: after the referenda held in September this year on the annexation of Ukraine's four oblasts, first Vladimir Putin and then Dmitry Medvedev suggested that the Russian Federation could use nuclear weapons to protect its territory. Also noteworthy, in his speech on 21st September, Putin stated that "in the event of a threat to our territorial integrity and to defend Russia and its citizens, we will certainly use all the types of weapons at our disposal. This is not a bluff! (...) The citizens of Russia can be sure that the territorial integrity of the Fatherland, our independence and freedom will be protected by all available systems. Those who use nuclear blackmail against us need to know that the wind can turn around." On 30th September, Vladimir Putin signed a decree on the formal annexation of these territories.

It is the purest fait accompli — in fact it would be, as it should be remembered that Russia has annexed to its territory areas over which it does not control, or which it has acquired in the course of recent months in the course of an aggressive war — and has attempted to concrete these gains with nuclear threats. The threat to use nuclear weapons would force Ukraine to cease its offensive activities and open the way for Russia to negotiate. By treating lands annexed in illegal referenda (including territories beyond the control of Russian forces), Russia is trying to lend credence to the probability of using nuclear weapons in their defence by creating a doctrinal justification. The annexation of part of Ukraine's territory to Russia means

that the possible use of nuclear weapons would take place not in the course of an aggressive war, but in defence of its own territory, making it more acceptable by implication. A frequently repeated opinion indicates that the Russians could be ready to use nuclear weapons if hostilities were to be conducted on its territory, as such a situation would exhaust the definition of an "existential threat" to the Russian state. The threats repeated by the Russian political leadership after the occupation of Crimea (Lavrov in 2014, Putin in 2015) seem to serve to further authenticate this policy. Article 4 of the Russian Declarative Doctrine on Nuclear Weapons ("The Foundations of State Policy on Nuclear Deterrence"), published in June, states that "State policy on nuclear deterrence is intended ... to guarantee the protection of state sovereignty and territorial integrity, as well as deterring a potential enemy from military aggression against the Russian Federation and its allies. In the event of an armed conflict, the Policy sets out measures to prevent the escalation of military operations and their termination on conditions acceptable to the Russian Federation and/or its allies." In turn, article 19, point (d) of the above-mentioned document lists "*aggression against the Russian Federation with the use of conventional weapons, creating a threat to the further survival of the state*" as a potential justification for the use of nuclear weapons by Russia.

Why would Russia use nuclear weapons in Ukraine, and how?

The answer to the first question (for what purpose would Russia use nuclear weapons in the course of the war in Ukraine) is crucial, as it may determine the manner of their use. Aside from using nuclear weapons to gain an advantage on the battlefield (which can be difficult given the characteristics of a conflict in which Ukrainian forces are dispersed and therefore do not appear to be an ideal target for a nuclear attack), the Russians could use them for two purposes:

1. Achieving a **deterrence** effect, against countries supporting the Ukrainian war effort (mainly NATO countries, in particular the USA, Poland and Great Britain).
2. Achieving a **compellence** effect on Kyiv, gaining consent to the termination of the conflict on terms acceptable to Moscow.

The difference between the deterrence of Kyiv's allies, resulting in a restriction or the complete resignation of the West from supporting further war efforts, and perhaps attempts to persuade Ukrainians to enter peace talks, and the direct forcing (compelling) of Kyiv's consent to start negotiations by the Russians is fundamental. It also influences how the Russians could use nuclear weapons.

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The difference between deterrent threats and compellent threats was presented by Schelling in his 1966 book Arms and Influence. Deterrence, argues Schelling, is usually passive, and requires the opponent to be discouraged from taking action; compellence is offensive in nature, and its purpose is to compel the opponent to take some active action. It is a truism to say that the fact that Russia possesses nuclear weapons, and the threats of its use, repeated regularly since the beginning of the war, were almost certainly a factor that tempered the readiness of the United States (and even Poland) to become more actively involved in the conflict. Russia has thus successfully deterred the US and NATO states from

intervening — also, if not primarily, by possessing nuclear weapons. Let us also remember that initially the Americans were not ready to provide Kyiv with advanced weapons systems, and this attitude changed gradually as Ukrainians continued to achieve success on the battlefield. Some readers may still remember the rather abstract debate about "defensive" and "offensive" types of weapons. To date, however, Washington has not handed over to Ukraine the types of weapons that could allow the ZSU (the Ukrainian Armed Forces) to attack the territory of the Russian Federation (such as, for example, ATACMS). The Ukrainians are aware of the Americans' fears. According to information recently released by CNN, Kyiv was supposed to propose that in exchange for the supply of more advanced weapons systems, it would give Washington the right to veto any target that the Ukrainians wanted to strike.

The important question is whether the Russians can assume in their calculations that their threats will allow them to effectively scare the West (primarily the US, but also Poland, as two key countries for maintaining the Ukrainian war effort), and Ukraine, without support, will be ready to start peace negotiations with the Kremlin. If Moscow proceeds from such an assumption, it can count on the mere demonstration of determination, in the form of readiness to use nuclear weapons — or very limited use, in which Washington may consider it advisable to limit support for Ukraine and/or to put pressure on Kyiv for a more favourable attitudes to peace talks.

It seems that communication from Moscow (such as leaks on the "nuclear train") is about this type of signalling. Although most commentators see this as merely a demonstration of ability, and therefore "sabre rattling." It is worth noting, however, that this action has another potential effect: the relocation — and possible pairing — of the warheads with their means of delivery may result in the chain of command and decision-making about their possible use becoming more decentralised. And even if not, the danger of accidental use — and thus accidental escalation — increases noticeably. Assuming that the reports are true, this action may also signal Russia's readiness to accept the risk of an accidental escalation. As Dima Adamsky noted, in the case of nuclear weapons, we are dealing with a reversal of the phenomenon, traditional for Russian strategic culture, which consists in strategic thought 'overtaking' the capabilities currently possessed by Russia. Instead, the capabilities developed by the Russian Federation for non-strategic nuclear weapons precede the doctrines of their use. Consequently, "Russian strategic inconsistency may play a destabilising role as it increases the likelihood of unintentional or accidental war." The availability of non-strategic nuclear weapons at an early stage in a conflict, unclear pre-delegation procedures, the use of dual-use delivery means and non-binding doctrines will make potential intent and misunderstandings particularly dangerous. It is also worth quoting the recent words of Alexei Arbatov, who stated that the difference between the ongoing war and the Cuban crisis is that the first one lasted several days, while the war in Ukraine has already lasted seven months. As such, the risk of "unforeseen events leading to escalation" (i.e. unintentional escalation) increases every day, and is becoming "very high."

If the goal of the Russian threats is to scare the West off, it can be imagined that in pursuing this goal they would decide to gradually escalate, starting with signalling (such as the recently discussed "nuclear train" passage) through dislocation of non-strategic nuclear charges from central storage facilities, pairing them with carriers. Demonstrations of nuclear weapons, such as nuclear tests, strikes in international waters or uninhabited areas in Ukraine (or in territories illegally annexed by Moscow), and finally at Ukrainian force groups, would probably be next.

By acting in this way, the Russians would therefore implement the postulates of the doctrine of "escalate to de-escalate," hoping that it would be possible to effectively deter Ukraine's allies against the actual use of nuclear weapons (due to the risk of unintentional escalation and the odium that would befall Russia in consequences of the actual use of nuclear weapons). The mechanism exploited by the doctrine of nuclear de-escalation (i.e. the threat of asymmetric escalation to the level of the use of nuclear weapons in the course of a conventional conflict) is aimed at manipulating the risk of uncontrolled escalation, above all vis-a-vis the US. It should be noted, however, that in the case of Ukraine, a country which is not a NATO member and which is not covered by the guarantees of the United States, the achievement of the intended effect in this way (ending the conflict on terms satisfactory to Moscow) is far from certain. The Americans might consider, for example — especially in the face of Ukraine's continued resistance — that stopping aid to Kyiv, or pressing it into agreeing to enter into peace talks, would be highly detrimental to the credibility of the US alliance. Threats, if they were directed against the USA, could only be effective if they decided to immediately stop assisting Kyiv in the conduct of the war — and even then it is worth remembering that in the course of counter offensives in the Kherson and Kharkiv oblasts, the ZSU managed to obtain significant amounts of equipment from the retreating Russian military (including hundreds of tanks) and ammunition. Thus, even the loss or significant limitation of the West's support might not mean that Ukraine is immediately deprived of the ability to continue operations.

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