

Apocalypse (not) now, or Russian nuclear threats in Ukraine. Part 2

10/2022 Albert Świdziński

What if the Russians wanted to end the conflict by using threats or actually using nuclear weapons not by trying to scare Ukraine's allies, but by forcing a readiness for peace talks directly in Kyiv? Sechser and Fuhrmann analysed a total of 200 cases of disputes between states (between 1918 and 2001) possessing nuclear weapons, in which one of them issued extortionate threats against the other.



(Source: Wikimedia.org)

As a result, they came to the conclusion that "nuclear weapons are of little importance" as a tool to achieve political goals through their enforcement. "Nuclear-wielding states have no greater chance of successfully extorting" certain actions on their adversary than states that do not have nuclear weapons, "even in high-stakes crises." "While nuclear

weapons can be an effective tool in the context of deterrence," they say this does not apply to "extortionate threats." This is because "nuclear weapons as an extortion tool have two significant limitations. First, they are not useful for capturing and holding land. Therefore, they do not increase the ability of states to take control of the territories that the state against which the threats are made does not want to surrender. Secondly, the cost of using nuclear weapons in a situation other than self-defence would likely be high "as it would carry a high risk of a harsh reaction from the international community."

In this author's opinion, if the Russians wanted to achieve the effect of forcing Kyiv to agree to end the conflict, they might not be satisfied with either a nuclear test or other, even more extreme forms of signalling their determination (a strike against no-man's lands, international waters or even groups of troops). It may turn out that if the Russians decided to achieve a conflict termination effect on acceptable terms with the use of nuclear weapons, the only way would be to carry out extensive *counter-value* strikes on urban centres.

There is no stake asymmetry between Ukrainians and Russians, as there is between Americans and Russians. In the end, it should be remembered that not only did the Americans not send their own troops to Ukraine, but also decided not to hand over more advanced types of weapons to the Ukrainians for fear of escalation. And due to the lack of stake asymmetry — probably in favour of the Ukrainians, for whom survival is the stake in the conflict — threats or even very limited use of nuclear weapons by Russia will not result in Kyiv agreeing to terminate the conflict. This is exactly what the Ukrainians signalled at the very beginning of the war, shortly after President Putin announced on 28th February that the Russian nuclear forces were raising their state of readiness. In response, Ukraine's foreign minister, Dmytro Kuleba, announced that Russia's use of nuclear weapons would be a disaster for the entire world, but would not force the Ukrainians to surrender. So instead of achieving political goals, the Russians would have broken the nuclear taboo by using nuclear weapons for the first time since 1945 against a state that did not have them, in an aggressive war that they themselves had started. This alone — and even with very limited use not resulting in significant damage — would make Moscow a pariah on the international stage. If, on the other hand, the Russians really wanted to use nuclear weapons to achieve the effect of forcing Ukraine to end the conflict, they would have to achieve the effect of a total collapse of the morale of Ukrainian society, both by eliminating the political and military leadership, but also by causing catastrophic losses in population and infrastructure, for example by attacking urban centres, thus murdering hundreds of thousands of their inhabitants. But then all the negative odium effects that would fall on Russia due to breaking the nuclear taboo would become an order of magnitude more intense. And finally — Russia would then be able to gain control of Ukraine, but would rule over territory reduced in part to a nuclear wasteland. This way, the Russians would have won the war (perhaps) — but they would certainly have lost the peace.

It is highly likely that if Russia did take such a step, the US would use all economic levers and the full spectrum of sanctions to prevent Moscow from maintaining trade relations with the rest of the world. Beijing, for both prestige and pragmatic reasons, would most likely be ready to participate in these sanctions, as would India. Contrary to the wishful thinking of some Polish commentators, Russia is not currently isolated on the international arena — but would be as a result of the use of nuclear weapons against Ukraine. Second, the use of nuclear weapons by Russia would have to undermine the confidence of Beijing, Delhi and the rest of the world in the rationality and predictability of Russia's political leadership.

How might the Americans react?

Let's assume, however, that Russia decides to use nuclear weapons against Ukraine anyway — perhaps because a greater role in the decision-making process would be played by Vladimir Putin's political calculations (as suggested by Joe Biden).

How could the West — in practice, the Americans — react to Russia's first use of nuclear weapons? There seem to be four possible ways of proceeding.

1. Symmetrical counter-escalation, thus, the US providing a proportionate response (using non-strategic nuclear weapons against Russia, on its territory, or on Ukrainian territory under its control).
2. Conventional response. This would be a response in the form of direct US involvement in the war in Ukraine by conventional means.
3. Staying the course, consisting in either the maintenance or intensification of the existing military, intelligence and economic support for Ukraine, possibly in conjunction with the imposition of additional sanctions on Russia — without direct involvement in the war.
4. De-escalation. If the United States deems Russia's threats credible, or is concerned about a further (perhaps uncontrolled) escalation following the Kremlin's first use of nuclear weapons, it may consider it appropriate to attempt to end the conflict through peace negotiations.

A symmetrical counter-escalation seems to be the least likely result, both due to the asymmetry of both the stakes and the capacity between the US and Russia. The use of nuclear weapons by the US against Russia would carry a huge risk of escalation to the level of full strategic exchange between the two nuclear powers with the most extensive and sophisticated nuclear capabilities. The fact that it is Russia fighting in Ukraine and not the Americans, and the fact that Russia is ready to threaten the use of nuclear weapons in the course of the war, clearly shows that the stakes in the conflict are higher for Russia than for the US. However small the likelihood of Russia using nuclear weapons against Ukraine may seem, the likelihood that America would choose to respond symmetrically is an order of magnitude lower. Finally, it is worth remembering the argument raised in the New Model Army Report (but also by Mathew Kroenig or Mark Schneider) about the asymmetry of capabilities between the US and Russia in terms of non-strategic nuclear weapons. This was also raised by Vladimir Putin, who in response to the "blackmail of representatives of the most important NATO countries regarding the possibility of using nuclear weapons against Russia" noted on 21st September that "Russia also has various types of weapons, some more modern than those at the disposal of NATO countries." Recall: while in the field of NSNW, the US has a total of 230 B61 gravity bombs variants 3 and 4 (of which about 100 are in Europe and 60 are assigned to the NATO Nuclear Sharing program), less than 25 modified Trident II ballistic missiles equipped with the W76-2 warhead and the extremely outdated ALCM maneuvering missiles (AGM-86B), Russia has a total of at least 2,000 thousand means of delivering non-strategic nuclear weapons in the form of a non-strategic nuclear triad, including the Kalibr, Iskander, KH-101 missiles, etc.

One can of course assume, as some Polish commentators do, *a priori*, that "since Russian tanks are scrap, nuclear weapons are probably stolen, rusty and not working" — but this is thinking for states which, although militant, are characterised by irresponsibility and the frivolity characteristic of clientelistic thinking, counting that they will always be defended by a patron who will ultimately bear all the consequences of escalation. Nuclear weapons, as noted by Dima Adamski, but also by Michael Kofman and Anya Fink, have been a key deterrent for Russia since the early 1990s, developed in response to the conventional weakness that emerged after the collapse of the USSR. The assumption that Russia's nuclear capabilities are overestimated and represent the level of conventional troops is — without hard, verifiable, empirical evidence — utterly irresponsible, and there is not the slightest chance that US policymakers will make escalation decisions based on such logic.

Another position, publicly presented — for example by General Petraeus, the former commander of the US forces in Iraq and the director of the CIA — would be conventional strikes against Russian forces in Ukraine, or against the Black Sea Fleet. In this context, there is talk of both strikes against the broadly understood Russian forces fighting in Ukraine, and strikes against those units responsible for carrying out the hypothetical nuclear attack.

It seems that an attack on units directly responsible for the nuclear attack on Ukraine may be perceived by Americans as extremely escalatory and therefore dangerous. The Russians have protected themselves — quite

explicitly — against the kind of action suggested by some former members of the US administration, i.e. a conventional retaliatory strike against those Russian troops that carried out the nuclear strike. Section 19c of the Russian nuclear doctrine published in June 2020 states that "an attack on critical government or military installations of the Russian Federation, the destruction of which would undermine the ability to respond to a nuclear response" is the basis for the use of nuclear weapons. It is worth noting that we are talking not only about infrastructure and/or effectors with strategic but also non-strategic purposes. In addition, we can add that the Russians have for many years clearly signalled their concern about the US's extensive capabilities to carry out precision strikes, in particular on nuclear resources.

It is also worth remembering that, unlike the United States, many of the systems used by the Russians on the battlefield are dual-use, so they can be used to carry not only conventional but also nuclear loads. This, in turn, means that a US attack on Russian units would risk destroying installations considered by Russia to be part of the nuclear forces, thus giving a doctrinally legitimate incentive to provide a nuclear response. However unlikely such an outcome may seem to us, this is not a risk that the Americans can afford to ignore. Even if it were not so, an attack on the armed forces of the Russian Federation would mean a direct war between the US and Russia, at a time when the use of nuclear weapons threshold has already been crossed. It is worth remembering that in March, President Joe Biden emphasised that the US was not ready to send its forces to Ukraine, because this would mean "the outbreak of World War III." In addition, involvement in this conflict would in practice prevent the US from reacting in the event of a sudden escalation in the Pacific.

A third possibility — much more likely than the previous two — for the US to respond to Russia's hypothetical use of nuclear weapons in the course of the Ukrainian war would be for Washington to stay the course. Then the United States would maintain or increase material, intelligence and economic support for Ukraine, without taking steps to directly engage in the conflict. In addition, the United States could decide to impose further maximalist sanctions on Russia, combined with severe pressure on India, China and other countries with extensive trade ties with Russia to join them. The risk of being subject to the US sanctions regime, coupled with the need to react to a flagrant breach of the "nuclear taboo," would probably persuade economic partners to isolate Russia.

The most likely outcome seems to be that Russia will refrain from using nuclear weapons while continuing to use threats. Assuming the absence of a sudden collapse of the Russian state, Russia may continue its campaign in Ukraine, counting that the deteriorating economic situation in the world, the vision of a long-lasting energy crisis and the limited resources of NATO military equipment may lead to the loss of readiness to further support Ukraine among Western elites and societies. The global economy is currently facing massive inflation, structural problems with hydrocarbon availability (not only due to the war in Ukraine), the effects of the Covid pandemic and the economic consequences of technological and economic rivalry between China and the US.

Author Albert Świdziński

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