Analysis

For as Long as It Works

Russia's Nuclear Signalling During Its War in Ukraine

| Tõnis Idarand |

January 2025

RKK ICDS
RAHVUSVAHELINE KAITSEUURINGUTE KESKUS
INTERNATIONAL CENTRE FOR DEFENCE AND SECURITY
EESTI • ESTONIA

Title: For as Long as It Works: Russia's Nuclear Signalling During Its War in Ukraine
Author: Idarand, Tõnis
Publication date: January 2025
Category: Analysis

Cover page photo: a Yars intercontinental ballistic missile launcher rolls from a hangar during a military exercise near Yoshkar-Ola, Russia (AP/Scanpix)

Keywords: compellence, deterrence, escalation, nuclear signalling, nuclear suasion, Europe, NATO, Russia, Ukraine, United States

ISSN 2228-2076

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List of Abbreviations

ASAT	anti-satellite
ATACMS	Army Tactical Missile System
BWC	Biological Weapons Convention
CFE	Treaty on Conventional Forces in Europe
CTBT	Comprehensive Nuclear-Test-Ban Treaty
CIA	Central Intelligence Agency
ELSA	European Long-range Strike Approach
ICBM	intercontinental ballistic missile
IRBM	intermediate-range ballistic missile
OSCE	Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe
UAV	unmanned aerial vehicle
WMD	weapons of mass destruction

Introduction

On 24 February 2022, when the Kremlin launched an unprovoked invasion of Ukraine, Russian President Vladimir Putin, in his address, warned everyone who would try to stand in Russia's way or threaten it that "they must know that Russia will respond immediately, and the consequences will be such as you have never seen in your entire history."[1] This statement was intended as a signal to deter possible intervention from the west and understood by the international public as a veiled nuclear threat, as it was made in the context of yearly nuclear drills launched just five days earlier.

Russia's invasion of Ukraine was mostly driven by geopolitical ambitions: Moscow had been growing frustrated by the post-Cold War international order whose rules and norms had become unsuitable for the Kremlin's aspirations. For years, Moscow has tried to pressure the west to recognise its status as a great power and accept its vision of rearrangement of world order to avoid its eventual marginalisation. To force the international community to respect its great power position, Russia has applied a wide range of coercive and deterrent measures, which fall under the Russian concept of 'strategic deterrence.'

Russian signalling, in particular its nuclear threats, has partly served the purpose so far. In an unprecedented situation of large-scale conventional aggression shielded with nuclear threats, the west has tried to avoid an escalation by self-imposing red lines and being hesitant when calibrating its support to Ukraine. The high cost of such cautiousness is being paid by Ukraine.

[1] President of the Russian Federation, "Address by the President of the Russian Federation," the Kremlin, 24 February 2022.

This analysis examines Russia's application of its instruments of suasion, including nuclear signalling, from the toolbox designed for its concept of strategic deterrence during the war. It studies their effectiveness and adjustments to the changes in the situation on the battlefield and international environment that serve to deter the west from intervening and restraining its support to Ukraine. This analysis also provides an overview of the western reactions to Russian signalling when making strategic decisions on escalation management and providing support to Ukraine.

1. From Theory to Practice

1.1. Russian Concept of Deterrence

The traditional concept of *deterrence* refers to measures – rhetoric and actions – to prevent an opponent's unwanted behaviour. According to this approach, *deterrence* is different from *compellence* which serves to make an opponent perform some desired action or cease the undesired action that is already in motion.

Unlike the western understanding of deterrence, the Russian approach seems to be holistic

Both deterrence and compellence have the goal of influencing the opponent's decision-making in the desired direction. The theory and practice of Russian strategy essentially blend them under the same concept of strategic deterrence, as highlighted in the 2015 National Security Strategy, which states:

> For the purpose of maintaining strategic deterrence and prevention of armed conflict, a series of interrelated political, military, military-technical, diplomatic, economic, and informational measures is developed to prevent the use of force against Russia and protect its sovereignty and territorial integrity.[2]

[2] Translated by the author, see: President of the Russian Federation, *Указ Президента Российской Федерации от 31.12.2015 № 683 "О Стратегии национальной безопасности Российской Федерации"* [2015 Russian National Security Strategy] (Moscow: The Kremlin, 2 July 2021).

Unlike the western understanding of deterrence, the Russian approach seems to be holistic as it comprises a wide range of instruments to manipulate opponents' decision-making, including both non-military and military measures designed with the purpose of managing escalation in wartime and containing adversaries in peacetime.[3] Applied in practice, deterrence in the Russian way is not always limited to threats aiming to keep the adversary from doing something, but it also includes threats of force or limited use of force to compel the adversary to take some action. When nuclear threats are involved, it could be referred to as *nuclear suasion*, covering all the forms of influence, including the latent aspects of nuclear signalling.[4]

In Ukraine, almost the entire arsenal of means from the Russian 'deterrence toolbox' has been used to gain and maintain strategic initiative, control the escalation, and manipulate the western capitals to restrain their support

In Ukraine, almost the entire arsenal of means from the Russian 'deterrence toolbox' has been used to gain and maintain strategic initiative, control the escalation, and manipulate the western capitals to restrain their supportive measures to Ukraine. Usually, these measures – rhetoric or actions – make some kind of reference to or insinuate nuclear escalation. A crucial element of nuclear suasion is signalling – military or non-military – which has so far been limited to making veiled or explicit threats and served the purpose of communicating intent, resolve, or information about the capability to apply destructive force.

1.2. The Ukrainian Theatre

Nuclear weapons are the centrepiece of Russian military doctrine, while nuclear signalling is part of its military strategy and an important element of its self-image as a 'great power'.[5] It is applied continuously in peacetime and during conflict by non-military and military measures, with the potential use of nuclear weapons as the main focus. In the context of the ongoing war in Ukraine, the nuclear element had been introduced well before the invasion. Rhetorical signalling, with warnings of escalation to a nuclear conflict, has accompanied the military campaign on the ground from the very beginning: at first, to prevent NATO intervention and later to retain the strategic initiative and deter the west from supporting Ukraine.

These threats are cross-domain – the modus operandi of Russian deterrence and compellence.[6] The nuclear element is present in military and non-military, political, diplomatic, and informational (cognitive) domains. Traditional measures of nuclear signalling, such as conducting exercises with the participation of nuclear forces or simulating nuclear strikes, demonstrating capabilities, including weapons' delivery systems, or increasing the level of combat readiness of strategic forces, have all been applied. Political-military or diplomatic measures, such as introducing changes in nuclear doctrine or suspending or withdrawing from respective arms control agreements, have also been on the agenda. Informational measures, like the use of threatening rhetoric to intimidate the adversary and its supporters, have been applied continuously throughout the war.

By and large, these signals have been addressed to the west. The tone of rhetorical signalling varies from very explicit threats on propaganda channels to vague references in top leadership's statements. Usually, the tone and choice of these measures depend on the developments on the battlefield or western support to Ukraine. Articulated by many different actors, the signals are often contradictory. This has caused confusion in interpretation as well as difficulties for Moscow,

[3] Michael Kofman, Anya Fink, Jeffrey Edmonds, *Russian Strategy for Escalation Management: Evolution of Key Concepts* (April 2020).

[4] For the best definition and explanation of armed suasion, see: Edward Luttwak, *The Political Uses of Sea Power* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1974).

[5] Matthew Kroenig, Mark J. Massa, and Alyxandra Marine, "To decipher Putin's nuclear threats, watch what he does–not what he says," *New Atlantcist*, 4 March 2022.

[6] Dima Adamsky, *The Russian Way of Deterrence: Strategic Culture, Coercion, and War* (October 2023), 70.

reducing the credibility of its messages.[7] For the west, this has introduced uncertainty concerning Russian intentions and potential actions. The cacophony of signals with vague references to nuclear use, threats, and later denial of any attempts at nuclear compellence might not have always been accidental but rather characteristic of a coordinated policy pattern intended to maintain the uncertainty.

The cacophony of signals might not have been accidental but rather a coordinated policy pattern intended to maintain the uncertainty

16 September 2021 marked the starting point of nuclear signalling in the context of the full-scale aggression against Ukraine. Then, against the background of the militant rhetoric about NATO enlargement and diplomatic pressure and in parallel with the build-up of forces on the Ukrainian border, Zapad-2021, a large-scale exercise, culminated in a simulation of a nuclear strike against NATO.[8]

From January 2022 onwards, the nuclear element became more prominent in signalling, with former president Dmitry Medvedev mentioning Russia's right to use nuclear weapons in case of an existential threat and President Vladimir Putin reminding that Russia was a superior nuclear power.[9] A few days before the invasion, Putin aired a false claim that Ukraine was seeking to acquire tactical nuclear weapons.[10]

On 19 February 2022, five days before the invasion, Putin oversaw annual strategic nuclear exercises, which used to be conducted in autumn.[11] This was a clear signal to the west, followed by Putin's veiled threat of a nuclear catastrophe in his speech on the day of the invasion.

Shortly after the start of the full-scale invasion, the Russian president ordered nuclear deterrent forces to assume a "special regime of combat duty," then followed by a launch drill, reasoning this as a response to illegitimate economic sanctions introduced after the invasion and "aggressive statements directed at our country by top leaders of NATO countries."[12] Despite such signalling by nuclear exercises and rhetoric, which received wide international attention, there was no evidence of any activities related to changes in Russia's nuclear posture. Furthermore, nuclear threats issued as a response to economic sanctions or disapproving statements clearly lacked credibility. Therefore, the United States and its allies saw no need for any counter-steps from their side. Russia's nuclear signalling was, nonetheless, unprecedented and caused anxiety and critical reactions internationally, shaping the overall sentiment around its demands and war aims.

Despite such signalling, which received wide international attention, there was no evidence of any activities related to changes in Russia's nuclear posture

On numerous occasions since February 2022, Putin reminded NATO and the world that the nuclear option remained available. As these signals were also alarming to countries whose opinion mattered to Russia, the Kremlin's rhetoric changed to denials of any nuclear intentions in Ukraine. It further claimed that allegations of such threats previously made by Russian leadership were deliberate lies, while Moscow was presumably doing everything to avoid nuclear war. [13]

[7] Steven Pifer, "Russia, nuclear threats, and nuclear signaling," *Brookings*, 13 October 2023.

[8] Mason Clark and George Barros, "Russia's Zapad-2021 Exercise," *Institute for the Study of War*, 17 September 2021.

[9] Jack Buckby, "Russia Warns of "Full-Fledged Nuclear War" Over Ukraine," *1945*, 13 May 2022; François Diaz-Maurin, "'Not a bluff:' Losing ground in Ukraine, Putin raises nuclear threats," *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists,* 21 September 2022.

[10] Sofia Brovchenko, "Украина может разработать ядерное оружие – Путин [Ukraine can develop a nuclear weapon – Putin]," *Korrespondent.net*, 22 February 2022.

[11] Tom Balmforth and Maria Kiselyova, "Putin leads sweeping nuclear exercises as tensions soar," *Reuters*, 19 February 2022; "'Guaranteed defeat': President Putin supervises nuclear drills," *Aljazeera*, 19 February 2022.

[12] President of Russia, "Meeting with Sergei Shoigu and Valery Gerasimov," the Kremlin, 27 February 2022.

[13] Alexey Zaitsev, "Briefing by Deputy Director of the Foreign Ministry's Information and Press Department Alexey Zaitsev, Moscow, May 6, 2022," Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, 6 May 2022.

Russia launched a new wave of nuclear threats in the autumn of 2022, when Ukraine conducted a successful counteroffensive and inflicted heavy losses on the battlefield. To strengthen the credibility of these signals, Putin warned the west that he was not bluffing and that Moscow would use "all available means to protect Russia and […] defend Russian land" that by that time, also included the Ukrainian territories under Russian occupation, "with all the powers and means" at its disposal.[14]

Russia launched a new wave of nuclear threats in the autumn of 2022, when Ukraine conducted a successful counteroffensive and inflicted heavy losses on the battlefield

The perception of escalation risk was further reinforced by speculations about the potential nuclear weapons use in Ukraine or Russia's intent to conduct a demonstrative nuclear explosion to signal its resolve. Russia's propaganda channels started a campaign about Ukraine preparing to use a 'dirty bomb.' Sergei Shoigu, the then defence minister, contacted his colleagues in the US, UK and France to relay a warning about an alleged provocation being prepared by Ukraine.[15] Although that warning was rejected as groundless, the concern that Russia was creating a pretext for nuclear use remained. Uncertainty created by earlier nuclear sabre-rattling by Moscow had given reason to doubt whether Russia would adhere to its own nuclear doctrine when considering nuclear use. The US made efforts to discourage the attack, reduce uncertainty, and to obtain through direct contacts a confirmation that Russian nuclear doctrine and conditions of nuclear use were still valid.[16]

When the situation on the battlefield had stabilised by the end of 2022, Russia toned down its nuclear rhetoric and shifted to other measures of deterrent and compellent suasion, including in the diplomatic domain and by regular accusations for confrontational nuclear posturing levelled against the west.[17] Russian officials started regularly emphasising that nuclear weapons could be used only according to the conditions stipulated in the doctrine and even denying that nuclear threats had been used altogether.[18]

As the Ukrainian ability to fight back depended to a large extent on western supplies of weapons, it has become the main focus of Moscow's threats. The nuclear card has always been pulled when commenting on western support to Ukraine. This link to nuclear escalation has become commonplace when reacting to western delivery of conventional weapons. Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov, among other officials, warned that western aid to Ukraine carried nuclear risks and that Russia would view the supply of, for instance, F-16 fighter jets to Ukraine as a nuclear threat (because in NATO, some of those planes are also nuclear-capable).[19] Putin even warned that shells containing depleted uranium provided by the UK to Ukraine would be considered weapons with a nuclear component.[20]

The nuclear card has always been pulled when reacting to western delivery of conventional weapons

As nuclear threats were not followed by much action – the announced deployments to Belarus being an exception – Russia had to expand its repertoire and introduce other ways of nuclear

[14] President of the Russian Federation, "Address by the President of the Russian Federation," the Kremlin, 21 September 2022.

[15] Jacopo Barigazzi, "Russia defense chief makes unfounded claims of Kyiv ready to use 'dirty bomb'," *Politico,* 23 October 2022.

[16] Felicia Schwartz and Max Seddon, "CIA director warns Russia against use of nuclear weapons," *Financial Times*, 14 November 2022.

[17] "Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov's year-end interview with TASS news agency, December 27, 2022," Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, 27 December 2022.

[18] Shannon Bugos, "Putin Denies Wielding Nuclear Threats," *Arms Control Association,* January/February 2023.

[19] Sergey Lavrov, "Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov's news conference on European security issues, Moscow, December 1, 2022," Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, 1 December 2022; Vyacheslav Volodin (@vv_volodin), "Поставки наступательного вооружения киевскому режиму приведут к глобальной катастрофе [Delivering offensive weapons to the Kyiv regime will lead to a global catastrophe], Telegram, 22 January 2023; "Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov's interview with Lenta.ru online newspaper, July 13, 2023," Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, 13 July 2023.

[20] President of Russia, "Press statements by President of Russia and President of China," the Kremlin, 21 March 2023.

signalling to avoid losing credibility. However, no reference to tactical nuclear weapons appeared in Russian nuclear signalling until the early summer of 2024 when Putin reminded of Russia's superiority in numbers of non-strategic nuclear weapons compared to the US nuclear capabilities deployed in European NATO countries.[21] On 6 May 2024, the Russian president ordered the drills of tactical nuclear forces practising the deployment of these weapons. This routine exercise was portrayed by Moscow as a response to the escalatory policy of the west.[22]

Russian nuclear signalling has created enough uncertainty to deter much more decisive and timely support to Ukraine

Russian nuclear signalling so far has created enough uncertainty to deter much more decisive and timely support to Ukraine, even though it failed to prevent the eventual delivery of most of the weapon systems deemed 'game-changers' at the time (e.g., cruise and short-range ballistic missiles, main battle tanks, fighter jets, etc.). The perceived risk of nuclear escalation, nevertheless, had an impact on what weapon systems were provided to Ukraine, on what conditions, and at what point in time. Nuclear threats and controversial signals are perceived in the west as Moscow's way of communicating its red lines. As long as Russia believes that nuclear signalling has the desired effect of slowing down the supply and restricting the use of assistance to Ukraine, such threats combined with other measures of deterrence and compellence will continue.

1.3. Suasion by Doctrine: The Old, the New, and the Ugly

The nuclear doctrine, and in particular the declaratory part of it, communicates the circumstances of nuclear use. Introducing changes to it or upholding discussions about this possibility could, in and of itself, serve as nuclear signalling, which is expected to empower deterrence.

Since the autumn of 2022, when Washington relayed its concern about the conditions on which Moscow could decide to use nuclear weapons, the doctrine was regularly invoked in public discussions and official statements by the Russian leadership. Despite the fact that Moscow officially denied the need to change the doctrine, the issue was kept on the agenda to remind the west that nuclear weapons were still there. Putin, who had previously objected to the changes to the document, hinted in June 2024 for the first time that the doctrine could be revised.[23] Since then, Russian officials confirmed that some changes may be introduced in reaction to escalatory actions of the US and NATO in Ukraine.[24]

On 25 September 2024, at a publicly broadcast meeting of the Security Council, Putin introduced draft proposals for updating the Basic Principles of State Policy on Nuclear Deterrence. The fact that this part of the meeting where the proposals of redrafting the policy document were presented was publicly broadcast confirms that Moscow has used the discussions on the doctrine for nuclear signalling.

This was further reinforced by the release of an officially confirmed, revised doctrine on 19 November 2024. It was timed to coincide with the publicity surrounding the US administration's decision to lift restrictions

[21] President of Russia, "Plenary session of the St Petersburg International Economic Forum," the Kremlin, 16 June 2024.

[22] "Рябков заявил, что российская ядерная доктрина не претерпела изменений [Ryabkov said that Russia's nuclear doctrine has not undergone any changes]," *Interfax,* 9 May 2023; "МИД заявил о праве на зеркальный ответ Штатам на размещение РСМД в Европе и АТР [Foreign Ministry says right to mirror states' response to RSMD deployment in Europe and Asia Pacific Region]," *Interfax,* 6 May 2024; "Песков связал учения ядерных сил с заявлениями об отправке западных военных на Украину [Peskov linked nuclear force exercises to statements about sending Western military to Ukraine]," Interfax, 6 May 2024.

[23] President of Russia, "Plenary session of the St Petersburg International Economic Forum," the Kremlin, 7 June 2024.

[24] "Рябков допустил коррекцию ядерной доктрины России из-за действий США [Ryabkov admits correction of Russia's nuclear doctrine due to US actions]," *Interfax*, 11 June 2024; "Рябков заявил о назревших изменениях в военной и ядерной доктринах РФ [Ryabkov says changes in Russia's military and nuclear doctrines are overdue]," *Interfax,* 18 June 2024.

on the use of ATACMS short-range ballistic missiles against targets on the territory of Russia, followed by similar decisions by the UK and France concerning the use of the Storm Shadow/SCALP cruise missiles.[25] Bundled with Putin's aggressive televised address to the public and the strike of a nuclear-capable but unarmed Oreshnik, an experimental intermediate-range ballistic missile, on a target in Ukraine, the revised nuclear policy was meant to amplify the effect of nuclear suasion – verbal and non-verbal – to retain escalation dominance.

The revised nuclear policy was meant to amplify the effect of nuclear suasion to retain escalation dominance

According to the previous version of the Russian nuclear doctrine, nuclear weapons could be used in a conventional conflict when there is an existential threat to the state – a condition vague enough to allow broad interpretation. The new wording allows Russia to use nuclear weapons in case of a "critical threat to our sovereignty," which does not reduce the ambiguity.[26] However, other changes clearly indicate that the new doctrine is tailored for the ongoing war in Ukraine and the context of the US and Allies' decision to lift some restraints on the use of ballistic and cruise missiles supplied to Ukraine. The revised doctrine expands the list of military threats to be neutralised by nuclear measures and regards "an aggression against Russia from any non-nuclear state but involving or supported by any nuclear state as their joint attack against the Russian Federation."[27] This was meant as a clear signal to some NATO members to reverse their decision to lift the restrictions on capabilities provided to Ukraine.

Another new element allows to consider nuclear weapons use in case of "reliable information about the massive launch and incoming attack of air and space capabilities, including strategic and tactical aircraft, cruise missiles, unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs), hypersonic and other capabilities" meant to address the increasing effectiveness of aerial attacks by Kyiv on Russian military infrastructure.[28] Furthermore, with the Kaliningrad exclave and the illegally annexed Crimea in mind, the doctrine stipulates that nuclear first-use is possible to counter "attempts to isolate parts of the Russian Federation territory or sever transportation links to them."[29]

Russia's nuclear signalling has forced the west to guess where Moscow's red lines are. However, studying Russian nuclear doctrine may not have been the best way to reduce uncertainty, as this document is not very clear about the use of nuclear weapons in conventional conflict and even less clear about the use of non-strategic nuclear weapons. Some leaked Russian documents show that the criteria for nuclear use, including pre-emptive strikes with tactical nuclear weapons, are rather low and allow for a broad selection of targets.[30] Moreover, it foresees the possibility of demonstrative strikes to signal capability and intention to use nuclear weapons.[31] These options are absent from the declaratory policy.

In general, the nuclear doctrines should be taken as declaratory documents which deter by their ambiguity.[32] Neither can there be any guarantee that decision-makers in Moscow – Putin, first and foremost – will adhere to the formal doctrine in situations perceived as critical to the regime's security. However, as Moscow realised that the west took official policy documents seriously, it continued to

[25] Jan Cienski, Laura Kayali, Jacopo Barigazzi and Emilio Casalicchio, "Biden missile move puts UK and French weapons into play," *Politico*, 18 November 2024.

[26] President of Russia, "Указ Президента Российской Федерации от 19.11.2024 № 991 «Об утверждении Основ государственной политики Российской Федерации в области ядерного сдерживания» [Decree of the President of the Russian Federation of 19/11/2024 No 991 "On the approval of the Fundamentals of the policy of the Russian Federation in the area of nuclear deterrence]," Official Internet Portal of Legal Information (www.pravo.gov.ru), 19 November 2024.

[27] President of Russia, "Decree of the President of the Russian Federation of 19/11/2024 No 991."

[28] President of Russia, "Decree of the President of the Russian Federation of 19/11/2024 No 991."."

[29] President of Russia, "Decree of the President of the Russian Federation of 19/11/2024 No 991."

[30] Max Seddon and Chris Cook, "Leaked Russian military files reveal criteria for nuclear strike," *Financial Times*, 28 February 2024.

[31] Max Seddon and Chris Cook, "Russian navy trained to target sites inside Europe with nuclear-capable missiles," *Financial Times*, 13 August 2024.

[32] Michael Kofman and Anya Loukianova Fink, "Escalation Management and Nuclear Employment in Russian Military Strategy," *War on the Rocks*, 19 September 2022.

play this card, even though it sought to strengthen the effect and timing of publishing the revised doctrine with other measures.

2. The Nuclear Options

2.1. As Coercive and Disruptive Diplomacy

To achieve desired changes in post-Cold War international order and European security architecture, Moscow has increased pressure by combining diplomatic communication with demonstration of force and bringing up nuclear issues wherever possible. Russia's diplomatic engagement with the US and its allies during the ongoing war has focused on constraining western aid to Ukraine. It has also reiterated that the problem is much broader and more fundamental than just Ukraine and concerns "the principles underlying the new international order."[33] As the blitzkrieg against Ukraine failed, Moscow returned to emphasising that the proposals from December 2021 were still relevant, but the dialogue could only take place when countries supporting Kyiv reviewed their policies. This has been set as a precondition for any bilateral negotiations with countries supporting Ukraine in its war effort.[34]

Moscow has increased pressure by combining diplomatic communication with demonstration of force and bringing up nuclear issues wherever possible

Since the Cold War era, it has been common knowledge that nuclear weapons may add bargaining power to diplomatic engagement. Nuclear suasion as part of Russia's wider strategy has also been applied in the diplomatic domain, raising the nuclear issue at the international fora to send warning messages. For instance, in October 2022, Moscow received a chance to organise a conference to commemorate the Cuban Missile Crisis, the most dangerous situation short of nuclear escalation during the Cold War. It provided the Kremlin with an opportunity to send warning signals to the west paired with accusations of nuclear blackmail and warnings that support to Ukraine would lead to a direct clash of nuclear powers and nuclear catastrophe.[35]

To maintain pressure on Washington, Russia has avoided any strategic dialogue with the US and disengaged from remaining arms control arrangements. The New START strategic arms control agreement between the US and Russia will have expired in February 2026. Despite Washington's proposals to discuss, without any preconditions, the follow-on options, Moscow has excluded any dialogue in its responses. When in November 2022, Moscow unexpectedly cancelled planned New START talks in Cairo, Foreign Ministry's Spokesperson Maria Zakharova justified the decision by blaming it on the US's "toxic behaviour and geopolitical realities."[36] Deputy Foreign Minister Sergei Ryabkov later explained that there was no prospect of a follow-on arms control treaty after New START. "The entire situation in the sphere of security, including arms control, has been held hostage by the US line of inflicting

To maintain pressure Russia has avoided any strategic dialogue with the US and disengaged from remaining arms control arrangements

[33] President of Russia, "Valdai International Discussion Club meeting," the Kremlin, 5 October 2023.

[34] "Putin says no talks with Japan unless it alters stance on Ukraine," *Kyodo News*, 6 June 2024.

[35] "Russia believes nuclear war must never be fought – Security Council Deputy Secretary," *Tass*, 23 September 2022; "МИД РФ предостерег США от вмешательства в СВО на Украине [Russian Foreign Ministry warns US against interfering in SVO in Ukraine]," *Interfax*, 23 September 2022.

[36] Maria Zakharova (@MariaVladimirovnaZakharova), "Дмитрий Песков отправил в МИД за разъяснением всех, кто интересуется причинами переноса заседания двусторонней консультативной комиссии России и США по Договору о сокращении и ограничении стратегических наступательных вооружений (ДСНВ) [Dmitry Peskov has sent to the Foreign Ministry for clarification for anyone wondering why the meeting of the Russia-U.S. bilateral consultative commission on the Strategic Arms Reduction and Limitation Treaty (START) has been postponed]," Telegram, 29 November 2022.

strategic defeat on Russia," he said.[37] Putin, in his annual address to the Federal Assembly, went even further when announcing that Russia was suspending the implementation of the New START and indicated the possibility of resuming nuclear tests.[38] The Russian Foreign Ministry commented that New START could not be reinstated until the United States changed its approach to Ukraine.

Some months later, the Russian parliament passed the law withdrawing the ratification of the Comprehensive Nuclear-Test-Ban Treaty (CTBT), followed by an assurance that Russia would not resume testing unless the US did. In November 2023, Russia withdrew from the Treaty on Conventional Forces in Europe (CFE). This was mainly a symbolic act as Moscow had already suspended its implementation years ago. Yet, it was an important step on the path of disrupting the existing European security architecture.

As part of its information operations (to be addressed in greater detail down below), Russia brought deception activities and disinformation campaigns to the diplomatic domain. Under the disguise of false claims that Ukraine and the US were secretly developing biological weapons on the territory of Ukraine, Moscow took diplomatic action under the Biological Weapons Convention (BWC) with the aim of discrediting Kyiv and its western allies. Although those claims were dismissed as groundless, Russia's false allegations concerning the gravest charges under the convention challenged the integrity of the BWC. Similar claims that Ukraine and its supporters among NATO member states were preparing to use chemical agents in false flag attacks were meant as a rebuttal of the accusations regarding the confirmed cases of the deployment of chemical weapons in Ukraine by the Russian forces.[39] As previous and new iterations of the nuclear doctrine reserve the right of nuclear response to the use of weapons of mass destruction (WMD) against Russia or its allies, such fabricated stories could be exploited by Moscow to create informational background justifying its nuclear threats or even some actions.[40]

Russia may have realised that its nuclear rhetoric alone is not sufficient enough to pressure the west. Therefore, Moscow has demonstratively challenged existing international norms and agreed-upon policies with more tangible signals and steps. Most importantly in this regard, it has reinvigorated economic and security ties with the states sanctioned by the UN for their nuclear weapons programmes. Putin's visit to North Korea and the signing of a "comprehensive strategic partnership pact" are, alongside pragmatic reasons for military cooperation, meant to raise anxiety in foreign capitals about the future of disarmament arrangements. By vetoing the renewal of an expert panel monitoring the enforcement of UN sanctions against North Korea, Moscow exemplified how disruptive its behaviour could be in the field of nuclear security and non-proliferation.[41]

Moscow has demonstratively challenged existing international norms and reinvigorated economic and security ties with the states sanctioned by the UN for their nuclear weapons programmes

Foreign Minister Lavrov, in his interview to *Rossiya Segodnya*, summed up this policy shift by saying that Moscow and Pyongyang shared the assessment of the current security environment and strategic goals and that any talk about denuclearisation of North Korea

[37] Guy Faulconbridge, "Russia warns United States: the end of nuclear arms control may be nigh," *Reuters*, 30 January 2023.

[38] President of Russia, "Presidential Address to Federal Assembly," the Kremlin, 21 February 2023.

[39] Maria Zakharova, "Foreign Ministry Spokeswoman Maria Zakharova's comment on Kiev regime using and planning to use chemical weapons," Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, 7 October 2023.

[40] Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, *Fundamentals of State Policy of the Russian Federation on Nuclear Deterrence, Approved by the Executive Order of the President of the Russian Federation No.991 of November 19, 2024* (Moscow: Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, 3 December 2024).

[41] Hyonhee Shin, Josh Smith and Guy Faulconbridge, "Putin flies into North Korea with promise to back it against the US," Reuters, 19 June 2024.

was, for Russia, off the table.[42] By standing behind Pyongyang – the culprit of the tensions on the Korean Peninsula and now, with the deployment of troops, a de facto party to the war against Ukraine – Moscow hopes to benefit from the uncertainty that such cooperation brings to the regional and global security environment.

2.2. In Information Warfare

Russia believes itself to be fighting an information war against the 'collective west' since 2014, where no rules exist and all available methods apply.[43] In Russian strategic thinking, operations in the cognitive domain help to shape the adversary's behaviour and support achieving its own strategic goals. The White Paper of the Russian Ministry of Defence defines information warfare as:

> [T]he ability to [...] undermine political, economic, and social systems; carry out mass psychological campaigns against the population of a state in order to destabilize society and the government; and force a state to make decisions in the interest of their opponents.[44]

During the invasion of Ukraine, different information warfare measures frequently referencing nuclear catastrophe have been employed to undermine, destabilise, and intimidate the adversary. Inducement of fear is at the core of Moscow's methods of information war that is embedded in Russian strategic culture, where the cult of fear is one of the central elements. As epitomised by some Russian experts: "The feeling of fear has been lost. It must be returned, because the world is based on fear."[45] According to such perspective, "Fear must be rekindled. Otherwise, humanity is doomed."[46]

Inducement of fear is at the core of Moscow's methods of information war embedded in Russian strategic culture, where the cult of fear is one of the central elements

The warnings of the looming Third World War with nuclear escalation, accompanied by regular nuclear signalling and aggressive rhetoric, serve the aim of instilling fear in the west. With these measures of cognitive psychological influence, Russia hopes to shape the picture of reality, create uncertainty, and thus maintain strategic initiative and escalation dominance. Nuclear sabre-rattling is deemed to be a powerful informational weapon, which Russia uses to manipulate its adversary into voluntarily making the decisions suitable for Russia. Reckless nuclear rhetoric has a psychological impact as these threats are psychologically charged and, therefore, can be used as efficient means of both deterrence and compellence.[47] Cultivating an image of Russia as an irresponsible and reckless actor further boosts nuclear signals.

Denial, deception, and disinformation are important methods of influence in the cognitive domain. They are designed to persuade the domestic public and international audience by communicating necessary narratives, including via diplomatic channels and multilateral frameworks, such as the UN and the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE). Russia crafted different false narratives, with some spread already before the invasion and continuously employed since then.[48] These methods are covered by the Russian concept of 'reflexive control' and – when applied as false accusations and narratives – justify the aggression and war crimes committed in Ukraine. Below are several examples.

[42] Sergey Lavrov, "Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov's answer to a question from Rossiya Segodnya news agency, New York, September 26, 2024," Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, 26 September 2024.

[43] Artem Sheikin, "Информационная война [Information War]," Federation Council of the Federal Assembly of the Russian Federation, 21 June 2022.

[44] TS Allen, "War Books: Russia's Information Warfare," Modern War Institute, 27 October 2023.

[45] Dmitry Trenin, "«Верните страх!» [Bring back the fear]," *Russia Global Affairs*, 26 September 2022.

[46] Sergei A Karaganov, "A Difficult but Necessary Decision," *Russia Global Affairs*, 13 June 2023; Sergei A Karaganov, "How to Prevent a Third World War," *Russia Global Affairs*, 26 September 2023.

[47] Stephen Blank, "Nuclear weapons in Russia's war against Ukraine," *Naval War College Review* Vol. 75: No. 4, Article 6 (2022).

[48] Global Engagement Center, *Disinformation Roulette: The Kremlin's Year of Lies to Justify an Unjustifiable War* (Washington, DC: US Department of State, 23 February 2023).

- **The central narrative** frames the ongoing war as the 'encirclement of Russia threatened by the US and NATO.' It was used by the Russian president in his speech three days before the launch of the aggression.[49] Claims that 'Russia defends its sovereignty against the west' – the 'real aggressor who wishes to destroy Russia through a proxy war in Ukraine' – are the progression of this narrative. As such, it serves to justify the invasion as a "pre-emptive military operation which was necessary and the only option" to prevent another larger war that would inevitably involve a nuclear exchange.[50]

- **The most extreme narrative** intended to demonise the opponent suggests that "denazification" and "desatanisation" of Ukraine are the goals of Russia's "special military operation." Albeit not taken seriously, even among the Russian public, the Kremlin continues to air it on a regular basis in order to dehumanise Ukrainians and justify war crimes as well as an escalation in the case of strategic setbacks.[51] In a nuclear context, such rhetoric aims to portray Ukraine as a 'rogue country' without a sense of responsibility and restraint when it comes to WMD.

In the autumn of 2022, a deception campaign that alleged Ukraine was trying to build and deploy a 'dirty bomb' achieved the desired effect. Even though Moscow's groundless allegations were dismissed, it was interpreted by many observers as a reflexive control operation targeting an international audience to create a pretext for nuclear use at a time when Russia was suffering severe setbacks on the frontlines. The pretext was considered false, but the possibility of nuclear action was taken seriously in western capitals, up to the point of the US intelligence estimating the probability of nuclear use as high as 50:50.[52]

Denial by Russia of its escalatory actions or rhetoric, while simultaneously projecting such actions onto opponents and blaming them for doing what it does itself, has become the usual pattern of Moscow's behaviour. False attribution of escalation or nuclear threats to the west is a commonplace method to pressure the US and NATO to be cautious when considering their policy of supporting Ukraine. Despite the fact that the west had carefully avoided any escalatory moves, Sergey Naryshkin, the director of the Russian Foreign Intelligence Service, told the media that western nuclear rhetoric was unacceptable and asserted that it was Russian rhetoric and restrain that left no room for nuclear first-use.[53]

Unlike official statements which paint the west as 'driving escalation with its nuclear threats', Russian propaganda outlets, hardline security experts, and some prominent figures in the Russian regime such as Medvedev have been explicitly promoting nuclear attacks on the west when addressing the domestic audience.[54] In this narrative, Russia must 'demonstrate resolve' and 'act first if necessary' to prevail in Ukraine, because the 'weak west' would be too scared of a 'nuclear apocalypse' to directly enter the conflict after a Russian nuclear strike.

The role of nuclear weapons has been elevated in the strategic thinking of Russian leadership and normalised nuclear issues for the public

Such rhetoric may have some impact on the attitudes of the Russian public. The approach of the Russian establishment and public to nuclear weapons has changed in the course of the invasion. The role of nuclear weapons has been elevated in the strategic thinking of Russian leadership and normalised nuclear

[49] President of Russia, "Address by the President of the Russian Federation," the Kremlin, 21 February 2022.

[50] President of Russia, "Address by the President of the Russian Federation," the Kremlin, 21 September 2022.

[51] President of Russia, "Meeting with Foreign Ministry senior officials," the Kremlin, 14 June 2024; "Выступление заместителя Директора Департамента по вопросам нераспространения и контроля над вооружениями МИД России А.Ю.Мазура на 1081-м пленарном заседании Форума ОБСЕ по сотрудничеству в области безопасности, 12 июня 2024 года [Address by A. Y. Mazur, Deputy Director of the Department for Non-Proliferation and Arms Control of the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, at the 1081st plenary meeting of the OSCE Forum for Security Co-operation, 12 June 2024]," Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, 13 June 2024.

[52] David E. Sanger, "Biden's Armageddon Moment: When Nuclear Detonation Seemed Possible in Ukraine," *The New York Times,* 9 March 2024.

[53] Michelle Nichols, "Russia to raise Ukraine 'dirty bomb' accusation at U.N., diplomats say," *Reuters*, 25 October 2022.

[54] Karaganov, "How to Prevent a Third World War."

issues for the public, which has become more comfortable with the idea of nuclear strikes.[55] For instance, according to one of the latest public opinion surveys, 39% of the respondents agreed that a nuclear strike on Ukraine would be justifiable, compared to 45% who disagreed with the statement.[56] Prior to the start of the full-scale invasion, the proportion of the Russians in favour of the use of nuclear weapons in a scenario of a limited war or an escalated war (i.e., entailing an attack on Russia's territory) was 27% and 29%, respectively.[57]

This development suggests that Russia's behaviour may become even more aggressive in the future, as societal inhibitions have been systematically dismantled by the propaganda machine. Furthermore, Moscow's information operations have, to some extent, succeeded in affecting public attitudes in the global south and in some westerns societies. They have created an image of Russia that is ready to accept the risks and tolerate high costs of escalation, up to the level of nuclear use, while portraying the west as aggressive but weak and unable to cope with the consequences of its own actions.

2.3. Through Military Actions

Military measures have a central role in Russia's nuclear suasion, and Russia has used them throughout its full-scale invasion of Ukraine. Activities such as nuclear exercises, raising the level of readiness of strategic rocket forces, demonstration of military presence, tests of new weapons, and announcements about the deployment of new capabilities are classical elements of nuclear signalling. Earlier planned and routine activities have been scheduled or framed to have an additional effect in the context of the ongoing war. When overseeing the test launch of a new intercontinental ballistic missile (ICBM) RS-28 Sarmat, Putin declared that the missile would be "a wakeup call for those who are trying to threaten our country."[58]

Earlier planned and routine activities have been scheduled or framed to have an additional effect in the context of the ongoing war

Announcements about successful tests or deployments of 'exotic' nuclear weapons delivery systems are part of this signalling pattern. In the autumn of 2022, the Russian Ministry of Defence informed that it is in the process of equipping a missile regiment in Orenburg Oblast with Yu-71 Avangard boost-glide hypersonic vehicles. In January of the following year, Russian state media reported that the K-329 Belgorod submarine had completed test launches of the Poseidon nuclear torpedo. The use of dual-capable cruise and ballistic missiles, such as Iskander, Kalibr, and Kinzhal, in Ukraine is also serving as a demonstration of readiness to deliver nuclear strikes.

Announcements about successful tests or deployments of 'exotic' nuclear weapons delivery systems are part of this signalling pattern

Likewise, an increase in naval activities or demonstration of presence close to NATO territories are part of nuclear signalling. According to the former UK Secretary of Defence Ben Wallace, Russian submarines have been travelling on unusual routes: "The UK had been tracking Russian submarines in the North Atlantic and in the Irish Sea and in the North Sea doing some strange routes that they normally wouldn't do."[59] In 2024, Russia framed a planned visit of a naval group of the

[55] Dmitry Adamsky, "Russia's New Nuclear Normal," *Foreign Affairs*, 19 May 2023.

[56] "Почти 40% россиян назвали оправданным применение ядерного оружия в ходе войны в Украине [Almost 40 per cent of Russians called the use of nuclear weapons during the war in Ukraine justified]," *Agenstvo*, 29 November 2024.

[57] Michal Smetana and Michal Onderco, "From Moscow With a Mushroom Cloud? Russian Public Attitudes to the Use of Nuclear Weapons in a Conflict With NATO," *Journal of Conflict Resolution* Vol. 67, Issue 2-3 (August 2022).

[58] "Test launch of Sarmat ICBM," the Kremlin, 20 April 2022.

[59] Ellie Cook, "Multiple Russian Submarines Moving in 'Strange Routes,' U.K. Says," *Newsweek*, 19 April 2023.

Northern Fleet vessels, including a nuclear-powered submarine, to the Caribbean as a response to possible changes in western policy regarding Ukraine's use of their weapons.[60]

Deployment of some nuclear capabilities on the territory of Belarus and related activities, like training Belarusian crews to operate Iskander missile systems and use of tactical special ammunition, were the first wartime case when tactical nuclear weapons were more explicitly used in nuclear signalling by Russia.[61] A year later, references to non-strategic nuclear capabilities have become regular when nuclear signalling was directed at NATO members in Europe.

Talks about the resumption of nuclear testing have been used for signalling purposes as well, but they may carry some political risks for Russia as the moratorium on nuclear tests has so far been followed by all nuclear states except North Korea. Putin hinted, in February 2023, about the possibility, saying that "if the United States conducts tests, then we will. No one should have dangerous illusions that global strategic parity can be destroyed."[62] Following the usual pattern, Kremlin's spokesperson Dmitry Peskov later denied Russia's plans to resume nuclear testing.[63]

In February 2024, it was reported that Russia had deployed a satellite in high orbit which, the US suspects, was nuclear anti-satellite capability in violation of the Outer Space Treaty.[64] This is the most worrying development so far in Russian nuclear signalling. According to the US Department of Defense, Russia has already been developing nuclear anti-satellite weapon systems for years. Moscow warned earlier that it could strike the US or Allied satellites, including commercial ones like Starlink, which have been involved in Ukraine and could therefore be considered as legitimate targets.[65]

Another dramatic move by Moscow took place in November 2024, when Russia used an experimental intermediate-range ballistic missile against a target in the city of Dnipro. Coming on the heels of the US administration's long-awaited decision to lift restrictions on the Ukrainian use of missiles against targets in Russia, the ballistic missile was initially thought to be an ICBM and would have therefore represented the first-ever use of such category of weapons during the war.[66] Even though this later was 'downgraded' to the intermediate-range ballistic missile (IRBM) class by the observers, the system named Oreshnik – a derivative of RS-26 Rubezh which, in turn, is based on the RS-24 Yars ICBM – generated a significant amount of publicity at home and abroad. Although nuclear-nuclear capable and armed with multiple independently targeted re-entry vehicles, its first operational use – still framed as a 'test launch' by the Russians – carried political and psychological rather than the military value of signalling resolve and the ability to escalate further. Intelligence about the pending launch and the aftermath of an actual strike generated a degree of panic, with

Oreshnik's first use carried political and psychological rather than the military value of signalling resolve and the ability to escalate

[60] Thomas Nilsen, "62 years after the Cuban Missile Crisis, Northern Fleet nuclear-powered submarine is headed for Havana," *The Barents Observer*, 6 June 2024.

[61] Russian Defence Ministry (@mod_russia), "Расчёты ОТРК «Искандер-М» Вооруженных сил Белоруссии проходят обучение в России [Iskander-M missile defence systems of the Belarusian Armed Forces undergo training in Russia]," Telegram 26 April 2023.

[62] Guy Faulconbridge, "Russia's Putin issues new nuclear warnings to West over Ukraine," *Reuters,* 22 February 2023.

[63] "Kremlin plays down idea that Russia is preparing a nuclear weapons test," *Reuters*, 28 April 2023.

[64] Mark B Schneider, "The Biden Administration is Still Sugar-Coating Russian Development of an Orbital Nuclear ASAT," *Real Clear Defense*, 31 May 2024; Unshin Lee Harpley, "DOD Official Confirms Russia Is Developing an 'Indiscriminate' Space Nuke," *Air & Space Forces Magazine*, 2 May 2024.

[65] "Ответы директора Департамента по вопросам нераспространения и контроля над вооружениями МИД России В.И.Ермакова на вопросы МИА «Россия сегодня» и информационного агентства ТАСС, 16 октября 2023 года [Responses by V.I. Ermakov, Director of the Department for Non-Proliferation and Arms Control of the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, to questions from Rossiya Segodnya news agency and TASS news agency, 16 October 2023]," Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, 16 October 2023.

[66] Seb Starcevic, "Zelenskyy accuses Russia of firing first intercontinental ballistic missile at Ukraine," *Politico,* 21 November 2024.

some embassies in Kyiv suspending services and the Ukrainian parliament, Verkhovna Rada, cancelling its regular session.[67]

Putin's accompanying statements that characterised the missile as a weapon that is impossible to defeat and threats to use it against decision-making centres in Kyiv were aimed to restore escalation dominance and signal that more pain would be inflicted unless the US reinstated earlier restrictions. The episode did not involve explicit nuclear signalling from the top of the regime; however, as a system designed primarily for nuclear use, its employment was timed with the changes to the formal nuclear doctrine and was meant to serve as a strong hint about the further escalation options available to Moscow, yet putting the onus of stopping the 'spiral of escalation' back on the US.

Russia is still treading carefully and taking precautions to avoid a direct clash of arms and inadvertent nuclear escalation

Nonetheless, Russia followed the long-established protocols regarding the notification of ballistic missile test launches, thus showing its cautiousness and effort to avoid inadvertently provoking a nuclear response from the US as a result of misperception.[68] This shows that Russia is still treading carefully and taking precautions to avoid a direct clash of arms and inadvertent nuclear escalation – a behavioural feature to be noted by those generating responses to its nuclear signalling.

3. It Takes Two to Tango

Throughout the war in Ukraine, Russia has used nuclear suasion to manipulate the risks and create uncertainty to maintain strategic initiative, with nuclear signalling being at the core of this effort. Russia and the west both have been trying to maintain control over escalation – Russia by increasing the uncertainty, and the US and its allies by reducing it. Russia has been largely successful in shaping the attitude in the west, as its nuclear signals are taken seriously despite the lack of related practical actions and the accumulating evidence of its 'red lines' being elastic. In the autumn of 2022, US President Joe Biden warned that the world was closer to Armageddon than at any time since the Cuban missile crisis of 1962.[69]

Western counter-suasion has not been so successful – neither prior to the full-scale invasion nor during it

Western counter-suasion has not been so successful – neither prior to the full-scale invasion nor during it. Warnings by the CIA director during a visit to Moscow in the autumn of 2021 of the grave consequences of an invasion were ignored.[70] President Biden's message at a video meeting with Putin that Russia would face tough new sanctions in the case of a military escalation against Ukraine had no deterrent effect.[71] In the wake of the Russian invasion, the US and the European Union introduced a broad set of sanctions and decided to support Ukraine with weaponry, but the messages of restraint and assurances from Washington had no impact on Moscow. Rather the opposite: Russia was encouraged to continue its risk manipulation while knowing the limits of its opponents.

Russia was encouraged to continue its risk manipulation while knowing the limits of its opponents

Soon after the Russian invasion, the US president outlined policy principles which have since framed the US and Allied response

[67] "Ukrainian Parliament Cancels Session Over Threat of Russian Strike on Kyiv," *Kyiv Post*, 22 November 2024.

[68] Sonya Bandouil, "Russia pre-notified US of 'Oreshnik' missile strike before attack on Dnipro," *The Kyiv Independent*, 22 November 2024.

[69] President Joseph Biden, "Remarks by President Biden at a Democratic National Committee Fundraiser," the White House, 10 May 2022.

[70] CIA Director William Burns, "The Role of Intelligence at a Transformational Moment," Central Intelligence Agency, 14 April 2022.

[71] President Joseph Biden, "Readout of President Biden's Video Call with President Vladimir Putin of Russia," the White House, 7 December 2021.

for almost three years of the war. It has been made clear that US forces are not and will not be engaged in the conflict with Russia in Ukraine as long as the US or Allies are not attacked. Instead, the US "will defend every inch of NATO territory with the full force of American power," continue reinforcing NATO's eastern flank, cooperate with Allies on Russian sanctions, provide Ukraine with advanced weaponry, and give financial assistance.[72] At the same time, the US administration also laid down the principle, which Washington had followed until November 2024, that the US was "not encouraging or enabling Ukraine to strike beyond its borders."[73] Biden also assured that the US was not seeking a war between Russia and NATO or the ouster of Putin from power in Moscow yet warned that any use of nuclear weapons in this conflict would entail severe consequences. These signals of caution were intended to avoid provoking Moscow and escalating the war.

This posture has been followed throughout the war and foreclosed a number of initiatives in supporting Ukraine, such as the enforcement by NATO of a no-fly zone over Ukraine, which was ruled out because of the fear of a direct engagement between NATO and Russian pilots. Initiatives to provide Ukraine with more sophisticated weaponry, like Poland's proposal to provide Ukraine with MiG-29 fighter jets, were also initially rejected by the US due to escalation concerns.[74] All this has given reason to conclude that Moscow's deterrence signalling, risk manipulation, and reflexive control operations are effective, as western self-imposed red lines have seriously constrained Ukraine's ability to strike back at Russia.

Western self-deterrence induced by fear of escalation and possible misinterpretation by Russia even led to extreme restraint, as planned strategic weapon tests not connected to developments in Ukraine were put on halt. For instance, the Pentagon announced the postponement of the scheduled test launches of a Minuteman III ICBM in an effort to reduce nuclear tensions with Russia.[75] For Russia, it was a clear signal of its nuclear suasion being credible and effective. The message that NATO was not seeking war with Russia has rather encouraged Moscow's rhetoric that this is exactly what would happen if the west continued supporting and supplying Ukraine.

In response to Russia's disinformation campaigns, the US also toned down its rhetoric of inflicting a 'strategic defeat' on Russia, which was used in the early phase of the invasion, as it became widely exploited by Moscow-supporting Russian narratives that justify the aggression.[76] Since then, Washington has become over-cautious in its wordings to describe the preferred result of the war.[77]

In the autumn of 2022, when the risk of Putin escalating just short of a nuclear attack on Ukraine or a demonstrative nuclear detonation seemed real to many observers, Washington sought the help of China and India to discourage Russia from a nuclear attack.[78] Despite that, the US and the Allies were developing contingency plans and communicating warnings to the Russian side about the consequences of such a strike, some circles in Moscow still speculated that NATO would not interfere if Russia used nuclear weapons or that this engagement would not be nuclear.[79] This was partly fuelled by the comments from NATO officials such as then Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg who

[72] President Joseph Biden, "Remarks by President Biden on Russia's Unprovoked and Unjustified Attack on Ukraine," the White House, 24 February 2022; President Joseph Biden, "President Biden: What America Will and Will Not Do in Ukraine," *The New York Times*, 31 May 2022.

[73] Humeyra Pamuk, "U.S. not enabling or encouraging Ukraine to strike beyond its borders -spokesman," *Reuters*, 7 December 2022.

[74] Pentagon Press Secretary John F. Kirby, "Pentagon Press Secretary John F. Kirby Holds a Press Briefing," US Department of Defense, 19 April 2022.

[75] Phil Stewart and Idrees Ali, "U.S. delays ICBM test-launch in bid to de-escalate Russia nuclear tensions," *Reuters*, 2 March 2022.

[76] "В Кремле уточнили, что Путин под словами "идти до конца" подразумевал цели СВО [The Kremlin clarified that by 'go all the way' Putin meant the goals of the SVO]," *Interfax,* 21 June 2024; "US policy of strategic defeat for Russia pushes world to disaster – Russian ambassador," *Tass*, 20 June 2023.

[77] Department Spokesperson Matthew Miller, "Department Press Briefing – May 20, 2024," US Department of State, 20 May 2024.

[78] Jim Sciutto, "US considering responses to possible Russian escalation in Ukraine, including its potential use of tactical nuclear weapons," *CNN*, 3 October 2022; Jim Sciutto, "Exclusive: US prepared 'rigorously' for potential Russian nuclear strike in Ukraine in late 2022, officials say," *CNN*, 9 March 2024.

[79] Laura Keffer, "НАТО не будет отвечать на применение Россией ядерного оружия [NATO will not be responding to the employment of nuclear weapons by Russia]," *Kommersant*, 27 September 2022.

insisted that the Alliance has not "lined out or gone into great detail about what kind of consequences there will be […] we have many ways to respond."[80]

In critical moments of increased uncertainty, Washington was thinking of off-ramps for Russia. Biden expressed his concern that "Putin does not have a way out of the situation and tried to figure out what could be done about that."[81] The concern that Russia might not have a way out of the war was based on misunderstanding the differences between perceptions of war in the west and Russia. For Russia, an armed intervention or war means not something undesirable and a last resort but a necessary measure to achieve its aims. As long as Russia considers its tolerance of losses and the level of acceptable damage to be higher than that of the west, Moscow's objective is not to end the conflict but to keep it going for as long it can secure its advantage.[82]

The concern that Russia might not have a way out was based on misunderstanding the differences between perceptions of war in the west and Russia

Because of too much concern about escalation, the efforts in the west to understand what the red lines of Russia are lead to 'analysis paralysis' and self-deterrence.[83] While guessing those red lines, the US and the Allies have chosen an incremental strategy and cautious step-by-step approach to providing increasingly sophisticated weaponry and ammunition to Ukraine. For critics, this was a clear recognition that Russian nuclear suasion worked and benefited from such hesitation.[84] The costs of this policy restraint and delays in ammunition and weapon deliveries were carried by Ukraine, especially given that some of the systems arrived too late or in too small quantities to make a major difference in the dynamics of the war.

As Russia has been irresponsive to signals of restraint and the evidence that the red lines drawn by the Kremlin lack credibility has become too obvious to ignore, the west has started reviewing its policy and changing its approach to escalation management. French President Emmanuel Macron acknowledged, in his speech in Sorbonne in April 2024, that the policy of assurances to manage escalation did not work and needed to be changed – in order to compel Russia to stop the war, the west should not be spelling out every day what its limits or red lines were.[85] A few months earlier, Macron succeeded in creating some strategic ambiguity for Russia with his unexpected statement that some western troop presence in Ukraine should not be excluded.[86] A rare phone call by the Russian Defence Minister Shoigu to his French counterpart with a warning of consequences for France could be seen as a sign of it. Until then, Moscow had successfully applied reflexive control by manipulating western fears which made their decisions and actions predictable for Moscow. France became the first western power seeking to turn the tables on Russia.

Only in May 2024, when Russia launched a new offensive on Kharkiv, NATO Allies, including the US, started reconsidering restrictions placed on the use of longer-range missiles provided by them. The then UK Foreign Secretary, David Cameron, indicated that missiles provided by the UK could be used against targets outside the Ukrainian borders. However, this remained contingent on the consent from Washington due to some subsystems in the Anglo-French Storm Shadow/SCALP cruise missiles being of US origin.

Washington came under increasing pressure from the Allies to reconsider its long-standing

[80] Joel Gehrke, "NATO chief hints allies would intervene in war if Russia uses nuclear weapons in Ukraine," *Washington Examiner*, 18 October 2022.

[81] President Joseph Biden, "Remarks by President Biden at a Democratic National Committee Fundraiser," the White House, 10 May 2022.

[82] Keir Giles, "Assessing Russian Success and Failure," *Baltic Defence College Russia Conference, University of Tartu Press* (March 2021).

[83] Stephen J. Cimbala, Lawrence J. Korb, "Putin's "bluff": a cautionary note about underestimating the possibility of nuclear escalation in Ukraine," *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, 2 October 2023.

[84] Cristina Gallardo, "Ukraine got its tanks. Now it wants jet fighters too," *Politico*, 26 January 2023.

[85] President Emmanuel Macron, "Emmanuel Macron: Europe–It Can Die. A New Paradigm at The Sorbonne," Groupe d'études géopolitiques, 26 April 2024.

[86] "In rare call, Russian defense minister warns French counterpart against sending troops to Ukraine," *AP*, 4 April 2024.

position that any weapons it supplied to Ukraine should only be used within Ukraine's internationally recognised borders rather than against targets inside Russia.[87] US State Secretary Anthony Blinken was the first in the US establishment to recognise publicly that Ukraine should be able to make its own decisions regarding what the best way to defend itself would be. Therefore, he proposed that the US engagement needed to adapt and adjust to what was unfolding on the battlefield.[88] As a result, the conditions imposed more than two years earlier were slightly reviewed, and the US eased the restrictions by authorising the use of American-made weapons for a 'specific purpose' of hitting the targets on Russian territory.[89] Some caveats remained in place, as the easing applied only to the areas close to Kharkiv Oblast, but not deeper or into other parts of Russia.[90] Ukrainian drone attacks on Russian soil – including strikes against oil refineries and attempted attacks against early-warning radar stations, which are a part of Russian nuclear deterrence infrastructure – caused concern in Washington about the possible perception of such strikes in Moscow and their potential to trigger serious escalation.[91]

As European Allies have led the change in policy by such measures as reducing restrictions on the use of weapons, not excluding the presence of their military advisers in Ukraine, and providing new weapons such as F-16 fighters, Russia respectively adjusted its reactions. At the St Petersburg International Economic Forum, President Putin directed more of his usual threats at European Allies, reminding them that without early warning systems, they are defenceless when facing more numerous Russian tactical nuclear weapons. He also expressed doubts about the US getting involved with its strategic capabilities in response to that scenario. Proposing an idea of providing long-range capabilities to states or even non-state actors who do have problems with countries supporting Ukraine – and following up on that idea by preparing to supply anti-ship missiles to the Houthi forces in Yemen targeting shipping in the Red Sea – became a potential new measure of horizontal escalation in Russia's coercion toolbox.[92]

This was met with more assertive nuclear counter-suasion from the west. NATO Secretary General proposed that the Alliance should show its nuclear arsenal to send a message to its foes by taking tactical nuclear weapons out of storage and placing them on standby.[93] Another tangible step in response to Russian threats directed at the European Allies was made during NATO's Washington Summit in July 2024, when President Biden and German chancellor Olaf Scholz announced, among other things, the deployment of medium-range ground-launched US missiles to Germany, starting in 2026.[94] With these weapons, NATO can reach Russia's deep-strike capabilities and strengthen the conventional deterrence of the Alliance.

Unlike Russia, NATO today has no medium-range ground-launched missiles and therefore remains vulnerable, as Russia has developed and deployed dual-capable ballistic and cruise missiles with a range of more than 500 km that are capable of reaching targets across most of NATO European territory. The US-German initiative, together with an initiative by some Allies to develop the European Long-range Strike Approach (ELSA), would reduce the current imbalance in capabilities and thus expand the range of options in countering Russian nuclear suasion.[95]

[87] Department Spokesperson Matthew Miller, "Department Press Briefing – May 26, 2024," US Department of State, 26 May 2024.

[88] Secretary Antony J. Blinken, "Secretary Antony J. Blinken and Moldovan President Maia Sandu at a Joint Press Availability," US Department of State, 29 May 2024.

[89] National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan, "Press Gaggle by Press Secretary Karine Jean-Pierre and National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan En Route Paris, France," the White House, 4 June 2024.

[90] Department Spokesperson Matthew Miller, "Department Press Briefing – July 15, 2024," US Department of State, 15 July 2024.

[91] Ellen Nakashima and Isabelle Khurshudyan, "U.S. concerned about Ukraine strikes on Russian nuclear radar stations," *the Washington Post*, 29 May 2024.

[92] President of Russia, "Пленарное заседание Петербургского международного экономического форума [Plenary session of the St. Petersburg International Economic Forum]," the Kremlin, 7 June 2024; Natasha Bertrand and Katie Bo Lillis, "Russia pulled back weapons shipment to Houthis amid US and Saudi pressure," *CNN*, 2 August 2024.

[93] Joe Barnes, "Exclusive: Nato in talks to deploy more nuclear weapons," *The Telegraph*, 16 June 2024.

[94] "Joint Statement from United States and Germany on Long-Range Fires Deployment in Germany," The White House, 10 July 2024.

[95] Timothy Wright, "Europe's missile renaissance," *IISS*, 25 November 2024.

As for further gradual lifting of the US restrictions on the use of missiles, only the de facto entry of North Korea into the war by sending as many as 10 000 troops to the frontlines in the second half of 2024 – combined with the end of an electoral cycle in the US, where such measures would have been extremely contentious and damaging to the prospects of the Democratic Party – has finally changed the calculus in the White House. Still, the decision to allow the use of ATACMS missiles against targets in Russia remained limited in scope by permitting strikes against targets associated with the pending Russian counter-offensive in the Kursk province, but not in other directions. This meant that, in those directions, Russia – its airbases, logistics, command and control, supply lines, and staging areas of troops – remained relatively insulated from the attacks with weapons more potent than the Ukrainian drones. This left some of the most pressing operational challenges to Ukraine such as the extensive use of glide bombs by the Russian aviation operating from the airbases inside Russia unaddressed. As often happened with the US approach throughout the war, characterised by the primacy of escalation avoidance, the lifting of restrictions was a decision best described as "too little and too late."

Conclusion

The war of aggression against Ukraine is a display of Russian nuclear suasion measures that it applied starting well before the escalation and up to the threshold of the full-scale invasion and beyond. It is a precedent in history when signalling that underpins nuclear suasion – to deter and compel the opponents – accompanies a conventional war of aggression. From the point of the classical theory of deterrence, Russia has been successful in creating an atmosphere of uncertainty and perception by the other side of a high risk of escalation – an escalation that neither side would be able to control and where some developments are "left to chance."[96] This is the situation that the west wants to avoid almost at all costs.

The war against Ukraine is a precedent in history when signalling that underpins nuclear suasion accompanies a conventional war of aggression

However, in essence, since the beginning of the Russian full-scale invasion of Ukraine, both Russia and NATO have been trying to control escalation. It is Russia, however, who was much more forward-leaning in its signalling to ensure it would be perceived as the party willing and able to take high risks and preserve escalation dominance at every stage of the war. The US and its allies, on the other hand, mostly sought to reduce the uncertainty and minimise the perceived escalation risk through restraint and assurances of trying to avoid provoking Russia, while carefully calibrating their support to Ukraine.[97]

Russia will continue engaging in nuclear suasion and still reserves a number of signalling options that do not cross the nuclear threshold

The west has not engaged in rhetorical exchanges in response to Moscow's nuclear sabre-rattling. There has been no major nuclear signalling and no change in nuclear posture. Yet, restraint and cautiousness by the US and the Allies had no effect on Moscow's signalling and even encouraged further threats of escalation. Russia had induced hesitation which delayed the delivery of more powerful weapons to Ukraine and imposed limits on their use which reduced the ability of Ukraine to defend itself.

At the same time, Russia's continuous nuclear signalling, absent any tangible nuclear activities on the ground, has been losing its credibility. Any nuclear strike by Russia cannot be conducted undetected as it requires observable large-scale

[96] Thomas C.Schelling, *The threat that leaves something to chance* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 1959).

[97] Janice Gross Stein, "Escalation Management in Ukraine: "Learning by Doing" in Response to the "Threat that Leaves Something to Chance"," *Texas National Security Review* Vol 6, Issue 3 (2023): 29-50.

preparations.[98] Moscow realises that any actual use of nuclear weapons will have significant political risks for Russia, including the reactions from countries whose opinion matters to the Kremlin. Nonetheless, Russia will continue engaging in nuclear suasion and still reserves a number of signalling options that do not cross the nuclear threshold: withdrawing from the remaining arms control agreements, conducting nuclear tests, and deploying nuclear anti-satellite (ASAT) weapons into the earth's orbit among them.

At the same time, Russia is beginning to lose arms control as leverage while the US is in the process of adapting its approach to arms control. Washington has indicated the possibility of increasing the deployment of strategic nuclear weapons after New START expires and is having a fresh look at the ongoing nuclear modernisation programme.[99] China is becoming the principal focus of Washington's nuclear and arms control policies, thereby increasingly turning Russia into an annoying distraction for US policymakers. However, as long as the war in Ukraine continues and the US remains involved in supporting Ukraine's self-defence or, indeed, in bolstering European security through NATO, the same policymakers will also remain at the receiving sharp end of Moscow's nuclear suasion.

The west should demonstrate resolve to change Moscow's calculus and challenge the notion that Russia can outlast Ukraine's will to fight and western determination to support it

Russia's commitment to the war has strengthened over the last three years. It has rearranged its economy to service wartime needs, up to the point that war's cessation would entail major economic disruption.[100] It seeks to impress upon various audiences its readiness for the long haul, enduring high costs, and taking high risks whenever necessary, and project a belief in its ultimate success. Thus, the west should demonstrate resolve to change Moscow's calculus and challenge the notion that Russia can outlast Ukraine's will to fight and western determination to support it with the resources.[101] Such resolve requires that the west overcomes its own mentality of de-escalation and excessive risk avoidance so successfully stimulated by Moscow and its rhetorical red lines drawn as part of nuclear suasion.

[98] William Alberque and Fabian Hoffmann, "Decoding Russian Nuclear Rhetoric – and How NATO Should Respond," *SCEEUS Guest Report* No. 4 (July 2024).

[99] Pranay Vaddi, "Adapting the U.S. Approach to Arms Control and Nonproliferation to a New Era," *Arms Control Association*, 7 June 2024; Project on Nuclear Issues , International Security Program, "Nuclear Threats and the Role of Allies: A Conversation with Acting Assistant Secretary Vipin Narang," CSIS, 1 August 2024.

[100] Elina Ribakova, "Russia's new economy may end up prolonging its war," *Financial Times*, 2 May 2024.

[101] Dan Altman, "How to Convince Putin He Will Lose," *Foreign Affairs*, 12 June 2024.

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ISSN 2228-2076