



## INFORMATION SERIES

Issue No. 548

February 27, 2023

---

### **Deterrence Lessons from Russia's Invasion of Ukraine: One Year After**

Dr. Keith B. Payne

*Dr. Keith B. Payne is a co-founder of the National Institute for Public Policy, professor emeritus at the Graduate School of Defense and Strategic Studies, Missouri State University, a former Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense and former Senior Advisor to the Office of the Secretary of Defense.*

#### **Introduction**

According to Admiral Charles Richard, then Commander of Strategic Command, deterrence working as we expect is needed for U.S. military planning at all levels: "Every operational plan in the Department of Defense, and every other capability we have in DOD, rests on the assumption that strategic deterrence, and in particular nuclear deterrence, ... is holding right. And, if that assumption is not met, particularly with nuclear deterrence, nothing else in the Department of Defense is going to work the way it was designed."<sup>1</sup> That reality should make U.S. defense planners truly uncomfortable because the functioning of deterrence is increasingly problematic. When deterrence is essential but problematic, America has a significant challenge ahead.

This point is pertinent to developments in the war in Ukraine over the past year because those developments illustrate in an irrefutable way that today's deterrence challenge exceeds that of our Cold War experience and policy. The basic principles of deterrence theory endure, but its application must be adjusted to specific conditions and circumstances. The contemporary developments fully on display in Ukraine cast doubt on our accumulated wisdom about the application of deterrence and what we think we know about how deterrence will work.



## INFORMATION SERIES

Issue No. 548 | February 27, 2023

---

This brief essay will discuss several of these developments readily apparent in Ukraine and their implications for deterrence.

### **Misreading the Times**

Immediately following the Cold War, many Western leaders, academics and commentators were convinced that a “new world order” was emerging. George H.W. Bush described this “new world order” in which “the principles of justice and fair play protect the weak against the strong.”<sup>2</sup> Nuclear weapons and deterrence were to play an ever-declining role and great power war was expected to be a thing of the past. German Foreign Minister Westerwelle labeled nuclear weapons “relics of the Cold War.”<sup>3</sup> The U.S. “unipolar power” era was to transform the old anarchic, war-prone international system—establishing the basis for global nuclear disarmament.<sup>4</sup>

Yet, Moscow’s invasion of Ukraine and nuclear threats over the past year prove as nothing else could that the widespread expectations of a new world order following the Cold War were as bogus as have been all such past expectations of a coming new world order—whether with the League of Nations following World War I or the United Nations following World War II.

Correspondingly, a fundamental development of this past year that now challenges deterrence expectations is that Russia includes—indeed, it highlights—coercive nuclear first-use threats in its repertoire of power. For years, and even after Russia’s invasion of Ukraine and associated stream of nuclear first-use threats, some commentators have continued to assert that this Russian threat of nuclear escalation—its “escalate to win” regional strategy—is an exaggerated misreading of Russian doctrine.<sup>5</sup>

However, it now is irrefutable that Moscow uses nuclear first-use threats as part of its “escalate to win” strategy to constrain Western options in response to its expansionist aggression. And, it appears that the fear of starting “World War III,” as President Biden has put it, does indeed constrain Washington’s—and other Western capitals’—support for Ukraine.<sup>6</sup> This is entirely understandable, but it illustrates the power that Russian nuclear escalation threats have to deter Western actions.

Whether Russia actually will employ nuclear weapons as part of its war on Ukraine, as opposed to engaging only in the threat thereof, is an open but separate question. Moscow’s exploitation of coercive nuclear threats to advance its revanchist regional goals—which is on display in Ukraine—compels rethinking multiple fundamental issues, including: the character of the international order; the requirements for deterrence and the prospect of its failure; U.S. freedom to defend Western interests via extended deterrence; and, the future of arms control.



## INFORMATION SERIES

Issue No. 548 | February 27, 2023

---

Russia sees itself as being at war with the United States and is in a de facto alliance with an equally revanchist China, which appears to endorse Moscow's goal of absorbing Ukraine.<sup>7</sup> This geopolitical reality represents a tectonic shift for the worse in the international threat environment facing the West. Yet, much of the Washington establishment continues to speak about the emerging international context in euphemistic terms such as "Great Power competition" and the "international community,"<sup>8</sup> as if Eurasia were a neighborhood with secure property boundaries and members who simply are engaged in a vigorous, rules-based sporting event. Hopes and expectations to the contrary, this is a grossly mistaken image of the international system.

Mistaken images of the international system cause distorted expectations about how deterrence will function. For example, the Biden Administration apparently had some confidence that Western economic sanctions and the "international community's" censure would deter Russia from attempting to conquer Ukraine.<sup>9</sup> This reflected the familiar Western expectation that an opponent's fear of sanctions and condemnation from the "international community" will somehow moderate its aggression. That expectation should be recognized for the vanity and misunderstanding of Russia that it is. Events in Ukraine demonstrate beyond doubt that Russia, in league with China, despises the West's "international community," seeks to overturn the Western rules-based order, and is willing to inflict and accept enormous pain to do so. Recognition of this new threat environment, as is now readily apparent with developments in Ukraine, appears limited.

For example, Moscow effectively all but withdrew from New START over a year ago; Putin has now done so formally in response to Western support for Ukraine,<sup>10</sup> and China shows zero inclination of interest in arms control. Nevertheless, many U.S. commentators and some political leaders continue to extol the virtues of, and call for a continuation of, the nuclear arms control process begun during the Cold War, as if that process is still alive and holds great potential.<sup>11</sup> The Biden Administration's 2022 *Nuclear Posture Review* goes so far as to claim that "Mutual, verifiable nuclear arms control offers the most effective, durable and responsible path to achieving a key goal: reducing the role of nuclear weapons in U.S. strategy."<sup>12</sup> Yet, for arms control to hold any such potential, the United States would need willing partners that adhere to agreed commitments. That hardly describes Russia or China.

There appears to be limited willingness in at least some Washington circles to recognize the harsh reality that is on display in Ukraine: The United States is in a new, unprecedentedly dangerous world, and a "business as usual" approach to deterrence and its requirements is now imprudent folly. Mr. Putin has set up a comprehensive rationale for nuclear first use in Ukraine and has added that he is not bluffing. His rationale for such thinking may seem absurd; but he appears sincerely to believe it. Typical Western hopes that a global "nuclear taboo" will prevent nuclear employment are now akin to expectations in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century



## INFORMATION SERIES

Issue No. 548 | February 27, 2023

---

that world public opinion would ensure peace.<sup>13</sup> No, it is the West's nuclear deterrence strategy that must be called upon to help provide an answer.

Nevertheless, based on the familiar Cold War balance of terror narrative and the expected deterring power of censure by the "international community," many in the West remain convinced that there exists an effective global taboo against nuclear employment and, correspondingly, that only an *irrational* leadership could consider the first use of nuclear weapons.<sup>14</sup> That is wonderfully comforting, but the truth is that when an opponent deems the prize it seeks to be its rightful due and of existential national (or personal) importance, there should be zero optimistic assumptions about what even a rational opponent will *not* dare to do.

That level of invested commitment is on display with regard to Russia's views of Ukraine (and China's views of Taiwan). In such cases, including in Ukraine, the level of commitment and willingness to accept costs is likely to be at least as weighty in determining how deterrence functions as is the number and correlation of forces, and probably more so—potentially to Russia's advantage. U.S. deterrence strategies and capabilities must recognize those truths; it is unclear that they do so.

### **The Enduring Value of and Need for Nuclear Deterrence**

Events in Ukraine also teach us that the West's continuing aspirations for global nuclear disarmament are the contemporary great illusion. Western advocates of the UN's nuclear ban treaty often stigmatize nuclear deterrence and seek to shame those who support deterrence.<sup>15</sup>

Yet, the past year has demonstrated once again that solemn commitments to nuclear agreements can be hollow, and that a nuclear shadow will hang over any great power crisis. The question must be asked: If NATO had no nuclear deterrent, how much confidence could the West now have that Russia would *not* employ nuclear weapons in the current crisis? It is not difficult to understand that the United States must be able to deter coercive nuclear escalation threats, and that means the U.S. nuclear arsenal must backstop U.S. conventional capabilities for defensive deterrence purposes in Europe and East Asia. This continuing importance of nuclear deterrence to Western security must shape the role and value Washington attributes to nuclear weapons—and should bring to an end the stigmatization of nuclear deterrence policies and capabilities.

In addition, a long-standing adage in Washington is that U.S. conventional strength can reduce or even eliminate U.S. reliance on nuclear deterrence, a continuing U.S. policy priority.<sup>16</sup> That anticipated linkage and goal may have been reasonable immediately after the Cold War, in America's "unipolar" moment. However, given the new threat environment on display in



## INFORMATION SERIES

Issue No. 548 | February 27, 2023

---

Ukraine, it should be clear that strengthening U.S. conventional forces is necessary, but that U.S. reliance on nuclear deterrence will remain regardless.

Why so? Because establishing even the U.S. conventional capabilities needed to defeat Russia and China in a regional conventional war, were the United States to do so, would likely compel Moscow and Beijing to consider more earnestly engaging in nuclear escalation, if needed, to deter or defeat U.S. power projection and thereby achieve their respective existential goals. Given events in Ukraine, it is now fully apparent that the United States must be able to deter regional conventional attacks and also opponents' nuclear escalation in the event opponents consider it as the path to victory.

In the emerging threat context in which opponents do indeed aspire to use nuclear escalation threats in just this way,<sup>17</sup> regional stability cannot be separated from U.S. nuclear deterrence capabilities. Indeed, absent a credible U.S. deterrence answer to Russia's theory of victory based on nuclear escalation threats, Moscow is likely to see regional war to advance existential goals as less risky, i.e., this apparent deterrence gap invites Russia's aggression, and likely China's. In short, there is no plausible route to lowering U.S. reliance on nuclear deterrence in this regard because Russia and China have a say in that possibility, and they are not giving the United States that option. Ignoring their voices in this matter is dangerous.

### **The Perception of Stakes**

Another lesson from Ukraine involves how Moscow sees its stakes in comparison to how it sees Western stakes, and what that means for deterrence.

Russia deems control of Ukraine to be of existential importance; Ukraine is considered rightfully Russia's and stolen by a villainous West. Recovering Ukraine is central to Putin's version of "manifest destiny" and a matter of correcting a great, historic wrong. As noted above, Moscow clearly has a high tolerance for inflicting pain and accepting pain in pursuit of this existential goal. For an historical analogy, think of Hitler's unalterable drive to destroy the 1919 Versailles Treaty and pursuit of German *Lebensraum*.

Rightly or wrongly, Moscow appears to see an enormous asymmetry in the West's view of the stakes involved and its own, i.e., that the outcome in Ukraine is not an existential matter for the West.<sup>18</sup> And, again, as noted above, this asymmetry in Moscow's perception of stakes works to its coercive advantage.

How so? Moscow's theory of victory appears to be predicated on this perceived asymmetry in commitment and the associated effects of Russian nuclear threats and predictable Western fatigue. Given the perceived asymmetry in stakes and related anticipation of Western fatigue, even a frozen conflict may be to Moscow's coercive advantage. Defeat is not an option, but a



## INFORMATION SERIES

Issue No. 548 | February 27, 2023

---

conflict that outlasts the West's endurance may well be. The disgraceful U.S. 2021 withdrawal from Afghanistan does not help perceptions in this regard.

A final point in this discussion of differing perceptions of stakes in Ukraine is that deterring Russia is not simply about creating some level of threat that Moscow will find painful, and thus is expected to deter. Just brandishing a threat is *not* deterrence. U.S. deterrence strategies must compel opponents to conclude, *per their own values and priorities*, that the violation of U.S. redlines is a *more miserable option* than their continuing to accept a geopolitical condition they define as *intolerable* – *whether that condition is continuing to tolerate an independent Ukraine or an autonomous Taiwan*.

In short, U.S. deterrence threats must promise costs that are *more intolerable*, as opponents calculate cost, than their continuing acceptance of a world order they find intolerable. The United States must brandish a prospective cost that is greater than what our opponents will have to endure if they do *not* alter the intolerable status quo. That is no small task and there is no methodology that can calculate that deterrence threat requirement with confidence. Think of how this reality comports with the point that all U.S. military planning depends on deterrence working reliably. We should be concerned.

Commentators often confidently presume to know what opponents won't "dare to do," including with reference to Russia's or China's future actions. It is comforting to believe with confidence that one knows how and when deterrence will work.<sup>19</sup> That belief greatly eases the uncertainty and stress involved in deterrence calculations. But, events over the past year have illustrated that such confidence is convenient, but unwarranted and potentially dangerous. That danger now is apparent in Russia's nuclear first-use threats and its bloody drive to conquer Ukraine. It may become obvious in the Taiwan Strait.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, after decades of Western confidence in the blossoming of a beautiful new world order, Russia's war against Ukraine over the past year has made painfully obvious that the old anarchic international system endures. In that system, Moscow will use force and nuclear first-use threats in its bid to destroy the status quo and restore its empire. The debate about that is over. And, it also is now apparent that those nuclear threats have at least a measure of the desired effect on Washington and other Western capitals. Whether Putin will choose to employ nuclear weapons is not clear and likely subject to many competing perceptions and motivations. But, the war in Ukraine illustrates the power of those threats and, correspondingly, that the Western anticipation of a declining need for deterrence and nuclear weapons—a particularly fashionable expectation in the immediate aftermath of the Cold War—should be discarded. The implications of this truth should affect U.S. calculations of its deterrence requirements vis-à-vis Russia and China.



## INFORMATION SERIES

Issue No. 548 | February 27, 2023

---

The deterrence challenge vis-à-vis Moscow, in league with China, is now much more complex and our past confident expectations are now uncertain. This is what we have learned about deterrence after one year of brutal war in Ukraine; it is a sobering lesson that should move Western thinking away from business as usual but, as yet, appears not to have done so in important ways.

<sup>1</sup> Quoted in, Amy Hudson, "Richard Says Nuclear Deterrence Connected to All Other DOD Capabilities," *Air Force Magazine*, May 7, 2021, available at <https://www.airforcemag.com/richard-says-nuclear-deterrence-connected-to-all-other-dod-capabilities/>.

<sup>2</sup> *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States: George H.W. Bush (1991, Book I)*, 219-21, National Archives and Records Administration.

<sup>3</sup> Quoted in, "U.S. Plans Help German Nuclear Arms Removal: Minister," *Reuters*, April 7, 2010, available at <https://www.reuters.com/article/germany-nuclear-idUKLDE6360X120100407>.

<sup>4</sup> "It is difficult to think of any moment since the height of the Roman empire in which the establishment of a world state was more possible than now." Campbell Craig, *Glimmer of a New Leviathan* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003), pp. 171-172.

<sup>5</sup> See for example, Olga Oliker, "Putin's Nuclear Bluff: How the West Can Make Sure Russia's Threats Stay Hollow," *Foreign Affairs Online*, March 11, 2022, available at <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/ukraine/2022-03-11/putins-nuclear-bluff>.

<sup>6</sup> See for example, Vazha Tavberidze, "Former NATO Commander Says Western Fears Of Nuclear War Are Preventing A Proper Response To Putin," *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, April 7, 2022, available at <https://www.rferl.org/a/breedlove-nuclear-fears-west-deterred/31791020.html>; Lt. Gen. Henry Obering III (ret.) and Robert Joseph, "Putin's nuclear threats worked against Biden — we must act before China gets the same idea," *New York Post Online*, June 21, 2022, available at <https://nypost.com/2022/06/21/putins-nuclear-threats-worked-against-biden-us-must-act-against-china/>; Richard Haass, "Op-Ed: How the nuclear weapons taboo is fading," *Los Angeles Times*, October 19, 2022, available at <https://www.latimes.com/opinion/story/2022-10-19/russia-putin-ukraine-nuclear-weapons-tactical>; Daniel Michaels, "Jens Stoltenberg Prepares to Confront Putin in Extra Year at NATO's Helm," *Wall Street Journal*, July 2, 2022, available at <https://www.wsj.com/articles/jens-stoltenberg-prepares-to-confront-putin-in-extra-year-at-natos-helm-11656763204>; Shlomo Ben-Ami, "Russia's nuclear threat has worked," Australian Strategic Policy Institute, June 8, 2022, available at <https://www.aspistrategist.org.au/russias-nuclear-threat-has-worked/>; Nina Tannenwald, "The Bomb in the Background: What the War in Ukraine Has Revealed About Nuclear Weapons," *Foreign Affairs Online*, February 24, 2023, available at <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/ukraine/bomb-background-nuclear-weapons>; and Joseph Cirincione, "Why Hasn't Putin Used Nuclear Weapons?" *TheDailyBeast.com*, February 9, 2023, available at <https://www.thedailybeast.com/why-hasnt-putin-used-nuclear-weapons>.

<sup>7</sup> Monika Scislowska, "NATO chief sees 'some signs' China could back Russia's war," *Associated Press*, February 22, 2023, available at <https://abcnews.go.com/International/wireStory/nato-chief-sees-signs-china-back-russias-war-97397155>.

<sup>8</sup> Congressional Research Service, *Renewed Great Power Competition: Implications for Defense – Issues for Congress, Updated*, December 21, 2021, Congressional Research Service, available at <https://crsreports.congress.gov/product/pdf/R/R43838/83>.



## INFORMATION SERIES

Issue No. 548 | February 27, 2023

---

<sup>9</sup> See the discussion in, Paul D. Shinkman, “Putin’s Hollow Nuclear Threat,” *U.S. News and World Report*, February 24, 2023, available at <https://www.usnews.com/news/the-report/articles/2023-02-24/why-ukraine-wont-lead-putin-to-nuclear-war>.

<sup>10</sup> Ann M. Simmons, Sabrina Siddiqui and Austin Ramzy, “Putin Suspends Nuclear Pact, Biden Says Russia Won’t Win,” *Wall Street Journal*, February 22, 2023, p. A1.

<sup>11</sup> See for example, Joseph Cirincione, “Don’t Panic About Putin’s Nuclear Saber-Rattling: The embattled Russian leader’s latest threats aren’t grave cause for concern in the short term. But we need to change our long-term plan for managing his nukes,” *TheDailyBeast.com*, February 21, 2023, available at <https://www.thedailybeast.com/dont-panic-about-putins-nuclear-saber-rattling>; and, Matt Korda and Hans Kristensen, *If Arms Control Collapses, US and Russian Strategic Arsenals Could Double In Size*, Federation of American Scientists, February 7, 2023, available at <https://fas.org/blogs/security/2023/02/if-arms-control-collapses-us-and-russian-strategic-nuclear-arsenals-could-double-in-size/>.

<sup>12</sup> U.S. Department of Defense, *2022 Nuclear Posture Review* (Washington, D.C.: Department of Defense, 2022), p. 1, available at <https://media.defense.gov/2022/Oct/27/2003103845/-1/-1/1/2022-NATIONAL-DEFENSE-STRATEGY-NPR-MDR.PDF>.

<sup>13</sup> It should be noted in this regard that 71 percent of the Russian public reportedly supports Putin’s war against Ukraine. See, Ann M. Simmons, “Putin Equates Ukraine, Nazis, Threatens to Escalate War,” *Wall Street Journal*, February 3, 2023, p. A7, available at <https://www.wsj.com/podcasts/google-news-update/putin-links-war-in-ukraine-with-victory-over-nazis/7d7d79a8-a07a-4b09-a010-dc3b142fe988>.

<sup>14</sup> Tannenwald, “The Bomb in the Background: What the War in Ukraine Has Revealed About Nuclear Weapons,” op. cit.

<sup>15</sup> See the discussion in Brad Roberts, “Ban the Bomb or Bomb the Ban? Next Steps on the Ban Treaty,” *European Leadership Network, Global Security Policy Brief* (March 2018), available at <https://www.europeanleadershipnetwork.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/03/180322-Brad-Roberts-Ban-Treaty.pdf>.

<sup>16</sup> *2022 Nuclear Posture Review*, op. cit., p. 2.

<sup>17</sup> See for example, Brad Roberts, “On the Need for a Blue Theory of Victory,” *WarOnTheRocks.com*, September 17, 2020, available at <https://warontherocks.com/2020/09/on-the-need-for-a-blue-theory-of-victory/#>.

<sup>18</sup> See Daniel Stewart, “Medvedev says ‘NATO would not intervene directly’ if Russia used nuclear weapons against Ukraine,” September 27, 2022, available at <https://www.msn.com/en-us/news/world/medvedev-says-%C2%ABnato-would-not-intervene-directly%C2%BB-if-russia-used-nuclear-weapons-against-ukraine/ar-AA12hZnv?li=BBnb7Kz>.

<sup>19</sup> Such commentator claims are frequent. See for example William J. Perry and Tom Z. Collina, *The Button* (Dallas, TX: BenBella Books, 2020), pp. 118-119, 128, 144; Kingston Reif and Shannon Bugos, *Issue Brief: Responses to Common Criticisms of Adjusting U.S. Nuclear Modernization Plans*, Arms Control Association, May 18, 2021, available at <https://www.armscontrol.org/issue-briefs/2021-05/responses-common-criticisms-adjusting-us-nuclear-modernization-plans>. A senior analyst with the Institute for the Study of War reportedly observed with all apparent confidence that, “The likelihood of Russia choosing – or Putin choosing – to use nuclear weapons directly against the West is astronomically low. It should not even be seriously considered at this stage.” Quoted in, Shinkman, “Putin’s Hollow Nuclear Threat,” op. cit.

The National Institute for Public Policy’s *Information Series* is a periodic publication focusing on contemporary strategic issues affecting U.S. foreign and defense policy. It is a forum for promoting critical thinking on the evolving international security environment and how the dynamic geostrategic landscape affects U.S. national security.





## INFORMATION SERIES

Issue No. 548 | February 27, 2023

---

Contributors are recognized experts in the field of national security. National Institute for Public Policy would like to thank the Sarah Scaife Foundation for the generous support that made this *Information Series* possible.

The views in this *Information Series* are those of the author(s) and should not be construed as official U.S. Government policy, the official policy of the National Institute for Public Policy or any of its sponsors. For additional information about this publication or other publications by the National Institute Press, contact: Editor, National Institute Press, 9302 Lee Highway, Suite 750 | Fairfax, VA 22031 | (703) 293-9181 | [www.nipp.org](http://www.nipp.org). For access to previous issues of the National Institute Press Information Series, please visit <http://www.nipp.org/national-institute-press/information-series/>.

© National Institute Press, 2023