



ANALYSIS

OBSERVATIONS ON U.S. NUCLEAR POSTURE AND THE WAR IN UKRAINE

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The war in Ukraine will soon be one year old with no end in sight. The much-anticipated lightning-quick Russian operation to neutralize the Ukrainian armed forces, overthrow the elected Ukrainian government, and install a puppet regime aligned with Moscow has been a stunning tactical and strategic failure. Over the months of war, significant combat losses have forced Russia to de-scope its objectives and reorient its forces in an attempt to secure the southeast corner of Ukraine (the Donbas area) and control the Black Sea. Despite a partial mobilization ordered by President Putin to offset his enormous losses of men and material, Ukrainian operations have forced the Russians to retreat from occupied areas in the north and from important positions in the south. However, the Russians still hold significant territory in the Donbas and the war has become a stalemate where both sides are reconstituting their forces for renewed offensive operations in the spring.

Nuclear weapons are playing a significant role in this conflict. While Russia has not employed nuclear weapons in combat, it has actively and publicly used its nuclear weapons in an influence campaign designed to fracture the NATO alliance and coerce its leaders into inaction and acceptance of a new status quo. This influence campaign began long before the invasion. Russia's investment in modern and novel nuclear capabilities has been the hallmark of Putin's tenure. He has personally participated in highly visible nuclear exercises, has overseen tests of nuclear delivery systems, and approved a new Russian nuclear doctrine that includes the potential use (perhaps first use) of nuclear weapons to compel the outcome of a regional conflict in Russia's favor (perhaps the very scenario unfolding in Ukraine). Within days of the start of the invasion, Putin placed Russian nuclear forces on a previously unheard level of high combat alert ("special regime of combat duty") and within weeks followed that with the high-profile test launch of a new nuclear-capable ICBM. As the invasion unfolded, Russian media and some senior Russian officials issued bellicose warnings threatening the potential combat employment of nuclear weapons and pointed to NATO's support for Ukraine as the possible trigger for such an action. Russian denials to the contrary were tepid and unconvincing, almost lending credence to the warnings. Despite some change in tone over the ensuing months, Russian leaders and media personalities continue to raise the specter of nuclear war growing from the U.S and NATO's support to Ukraine.

As with other aspects of the Ukraine invasion, Russia's nuclear coercion campaign has also failed to achieve its main purpose. Ukraine continues to fight. Western governments have levied unprecedented economic sanctions on Russia and continue to resupply Ukraine with a vast number of modern and increasingly sophisticated weapons. In a remarkable show of resolve and despite Moscow's dire warnings (to include the threat of deploying nuclear weapons near the Baltic States), NATO is expanding its membership with the addition of Sweden and Finland on Russia's northern flank. Russia is increasingly isolated



and criticized on the world stage. Most importantly, Russia has not crossed the threshold for the combat employment of nuclear weapons.

It's premature to draw lessons or, worse, conclusions from this unprecedented conflict on NATO's borders where nuclear armed powers are directly and indirectly involved. Beyond a coercion campaign, we cannot dismiss the possibility that Putin will at some point "escalate to de-escalate" and order the employment of nuclear weapons out of a sense of desperation. But to date, the NATO alliance remains strong, the United States and NATO have taken critical support measures in the face of Russia's nuclear threats, and the threshold for the combat employment of nuclear weapons has not been crossed. In my estimation, that's not an accident; on the contrary, I believe the Ukraine war is validating the foundational importance and continued effectiveness of U.S. nuclear policies, alliance commitments, force structure, and force posture and offer six observations to support that view.

Observation 1

No Other Weapons Have the Same Deterrent Effect as Nuclear Weapons

While it's impossible to know all the factors that went into Putin's decisions regarding the invasion and subsequent war, hints from open sources suggest the unpredictable risks and fear of nuclear escalation were a significant factor that limited Russia's initial tactical and operational goals and continue to constrain ongoing operations. Similarly, public statements from U.S. and NATO leaders suggest the risk of nuclear escalation is a significant factor shaping NATO's careful responses as well. Each side is well aware of the nuclear capabilities possessed by the other and the inconceivable destruction and unpredictable escalation that would likely occur if those weapons were used in combat.

Nuclear weapons do not prevent all conflicts; however, nuclear weapons have prevented direct conflict between the major nuclear powers since 1945. As ugly as it is, the war in Ukraine remains a limited conventional conflict being fought for limited aims. Russia is going to extraordinary lengths to avoid direct conflict with the United States and NATO; NATO is going to similar lengths to avoid a direct military conflict with Russia while, as President Biden has stated, drawing a line around "every square inch" of NATO territory.

Without question, the poor performance of Russia's conventional military has been a major factor that forced Putin to de-scope his war objectives and restrain from escalating the conflict beyond Ukraine's borders. U.S. and NATO conventional forces have always played a major deterrent role in Europe and at this point it is clear Russia can ill afford a conventional conflict with NATO that it is unprepared to fight and likely to lose. However, what was true through the decades of the Cold War remains true today—the unique risks posed by nuclear weapons still cause leaders to pause and ponder the potential for and consequences of escalation before they act.

Observation 2

U.S. Nuclear Policy Serves Contemporary Deterrence Objectives

Deterrence exists when adversary leaders calculate they will not be able to achieve their objectives, will suffer unacceptable consequences if they try, or both (and, in some cases, when leaders calculate that the benefit of restraint outweighs the advantages of using the weapons). U.S. nuclear declaratory policy presents Russian leaders with a conundrum in their decision calculations. While U.S. policy sets a credible threshold for considering the combat employment of nuclear weapons (i.e., extreme circumstances involving vital national interests) and the manner in which they might be employed (i.e., flexibility and adaptability), the policy remains intentionally ambiguous regarding the exact scenarios that would lead to their use (i.e., primarily to respond to adversary use of a nuclear weapon but including the potential for nuclear use in certain other extreme cases).

Assessing U.S. and NATO political will to use nuclear weapons is a difficult task for any adversary. Russian leaders may believe the United States and NATO lack the political will to employ nuclear weapons in a conflict; but rational decisionmakers cannot overlook the extraordinary risk of acting on that belief in the face of U.S. declaratory policy and a continued nuclear commitment to NATO backed by ready and capable forces. During the Ukraine conflict U.S. and NATO leaders have reinforced policy with clear public and, reportedly, private statements that Russian use of nuclear weapons would be a grave mistake with severe consequences. Nuclear weapons remain the “elephant in the room” that introduces significant risk that a conventional war between nuclear-armed adversaries could quickly escalate into the combat use of those weapons. To date, Russia’s behavior in Ukraine suggests that the risk of uncontrollable nuclear escalation has kept Russia’s use of those weapons to overheated rhetoric.

Contrast this situation with the potential difference in Russia’s risk calculations if the United States had adopted “sole use” or “no first use” policies as some advocates proposed. Such policies would have made Russian calculations of conventional war with the United States and NATO far less risky, with unintended consequences for deterrence.

Observation 3

The U.S. Nuclear Deterrent Force Presents Russia With Insurmountable Planning and Defense Problems While Preserving U.S. Presidential Decision Space

Imagine if the United States had arrived at February 24, 2022, with a significantly different nuclear force structure and posture: ICBMs removed from readiness (de-alerted) or completely retired; SSBN patrols reduced or confined to one ocean; nuclear forces unilaterally reduced to levels well below those permitted by New START; theater nuclear weapons removed from Europe and, perhaps, completely de-committed from NATO;

presidential authority to order the employment of nuclear weapons limited or eliminated; and an aged deterrent force and command and control system with no modernization programs underway. All of these possibilities have been seriously proposed by a handful of U.S. policymakers and anti-nuclear advocates over the last decade or more.

Instead, the United States entered the Ukraine crisis with up to 400 responsive ICBMs and a portion of the survivable SSBN fleet on daily alert backed by flexible long-range bombers that commanders can use with great effect for conventional missions or which the president can return to nuclear duty if needed. Additional SSBNs can also be deployed to patrol areas, if necessary (generated in nuclear parlance), and more weapons beyond New START limits can be uploaded over time as a hedge against technical failure or geopolitical change. In essence, today's force structure and posture (and the men and women at the tip of the nuclear spear) provide the credible capabilities U.S. leaders rely on to implement U.S. policy. Perhaps most importantly, when Putin announced an increase in Russian nuclear alert levels, the president was not forced to make any similar dire pronouncements about using nuclear weapons or make difficult choices regarding changes to the daily force commitment or posture (e.g., returning bombers to nuclear alert or putting more ballistic missile submarines to sea) that could have proved escalatory in and of themselves. Instead, U.S. leaders were able to remain calm and keep their rhetoric cool.

The U.S. nuclear deterrent force—that is, the Triad of delivery systems and the manner in which it is operated—continues to make sound strategic sense; there is not a more effective way to meet our deterrence objectives. ICBMs and SSBNs can be immediately retargeted from broad open ocean areas to hold the most important Russian targets at risk, with the promise of a prompt assured response if ever needed; at the same time, long-range dual capable bombers are being deployed in a non-nuclear role as a visible signal of U.S. commitment to allies and offensive capability in either role.

Observation 4

NATO's Nuclear Sharing Arrangements Have Important Deterrence and Assurance Values of Their Own

The United States has remained committed to NATO as a nuclear alliance despite calls from some U.S. political quarters to either remove U.S. weapons from Europe or eliminate the U.S. nuclear commitment to NATO altogether. The United States has also remained committed to the NATO alliance despite some suggestions for the United States to completely withdraw from the alliance in favor of an isolationist doctrine.

Credible deterrence can never be based on a bluff. The Ukraine conflict has validated the importance of retaining visible, forward-deployed nuclear weapons and dual-capable aircraft in Europe. More importantly, the conflict has validated the criticality of allies, alliances, and mutual defense in the 21st Century. Again, in the face of Putin's nuclear threats the president would have been faced with far different decisions if NATO were no longer a nuclear alliance or U.S. weapons and dual capable fighters were no longer deployed there; a

situation that would have been even worse if NATO had dissolved or the U.S. commitment to the alliance had not remained strong. Without NATO, I daresay it is not a stretch to imagine Russia conducting a series of Ukraine-like invasions around its periphery undeterred by unconvincing conventional or nuclear options, especially if deterrence was based on nuclear weapons as the only option. The United States made the isolationist mistake twice in the 20th Century with grave consequences.

Observation 5

The U.S. Deterrent Will Not Remain Credible Without Improvements in Policy and Capabilities

Doubts about U.S. political will and force capabilities can lead an adversary to make dangerous miscalculations that create the potential for unintended escalation in a crisis or conflict. U.S. nuclear policy and capabilities are credible today, but the Ukraine war has provided a glimpse of the lethality and intensity of warfare involving drones, hypersonic weapons, global information campaigns, artificial intelligence, persistent surveillance, social media, and other modern capabilities that create significant complexity and uncertainties for the future. Other nations are investing heavily in these capabilities and the cost of entry is often low enough to ensure proliferation.

The United States will never again have the luxury of time to prepare and benign sanctuaries from which to fight. Nuclear weapons will continue to provide unique challenges while offering deterrent benefits that we cannot ignore. Numerous studies and assessments in the United States have proven that we must continue to invest in and modernize both conventional and nuclear forces. Of particular concern: China is fast becoming a nuclear peer with the United States and the “two nuclear peer” problem presents new dynamics that could invalidate some key U.S. strategic assumptions and policy tenets. A number of issues deserve attention to ensure adversary deterrence and allied assurance remain credible and nuclear weapons are never used in combat in Ukraine or elsewhere:

- U.S. policymakers must continuously re-emphasize the continued importance and enduring role of U.S. nuclear weapons for deterrence and assurance.
- The United States must proceed with the bi-partisan nuclear modernization program (weapons, delivery systems, command/control/communications), including the critical industrial complex that maintains the weapons and stockpile, without delay.
- The United States should accelerate the nuclear certification of the F-35 and B-21, and production of the B-61/12 nuclear weapon and Long Range Stand Off cruise missile.
- The United States should build and deploy nuclear-capable cruise missiles (SLCM-N) on selected attack submarines as a clear signal of allied assurance.
- While USSTRATCOM remains the central focus of U.S. nuclear capabilities, nuclear planning must be restored across the U.S. combatant commands and within NATO.

- The United States must ensure its conventional forces, missile defenses, space, and cyberspace capabilities remain strong and capable of confronting 21st Century threats.

Observation 6 Deterrence Could Fail

While I remain confident in the effectiveness of the U.S. nuclear deterrent, history teaches that wars are dangerous and unpredictable. The United States, NATO, and our allies and partners must be realistic and prepare for the possibility that Russia could use its nuclear weapons in an attempt to resolve the Ukraine conflict in its favor. Along with intense diplomacy, the United States and NATO must plan and realistically train and exercise for such an eventuality. In this way we will enhance deterrence effectiveness and make a nuclear eventuality less, not more, likely.

Conclusion

Although the conflict in Ukraine remains fraught with uncertainty and far from resolved, I believe U.S. nuclear strategy and posture have been shown to be sound by this war. Nuclear weapons have helped to safeguard allied interests, to limit the war, and to reduce the risks of escalation. The experience has demonstrated the wisdom of all recent administrations in rejecting the calls for “bold action” in the name of risk reduction or total elimination of nuclear weapons. However, the risk of nuclear escalation (intended or unintended) will remain as long as this war continues. It is vitally important to keep the nuclear employment threshold high by bringing U.S. policies up to date with modernized capabilities to carry them out.

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