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Russia-Ukraine Crisis From A Nuclear Prism

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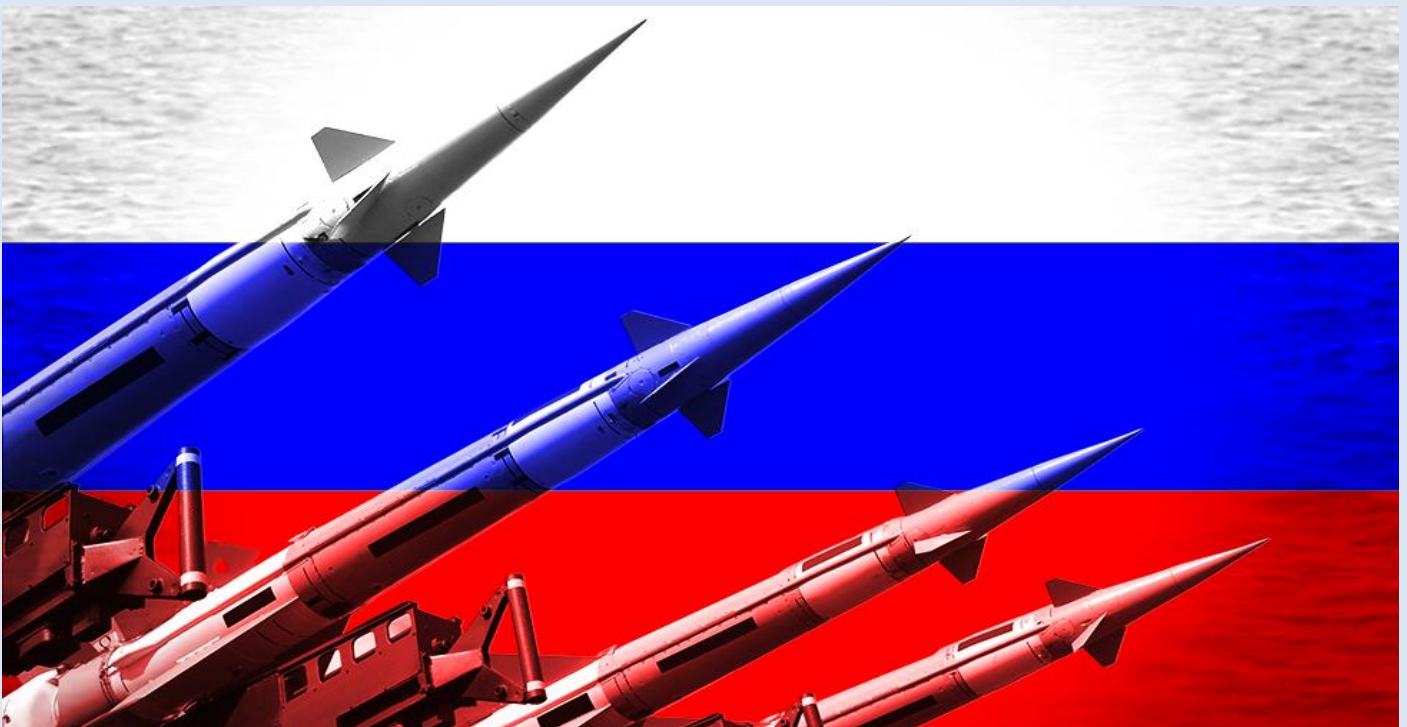


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The Russian invasion (“special military operation”) of Ukraine, an inherently conventional military operation carried out under the veiled nuclear threat to deter external intervention, has significant implications for deterrence theory and non-proliferation regime. The argument that Ukrainian nuclear weapons might have deterred the Russian military invasion sends a clear signal to states like North Korea and Iran not to give up nuclear weapons and keep hedging. The closing gap between the conventional capabilities of Russia and NATO and the Russian demonstration of conventional military power might cause NATO countries to argue for an increased role of nuclear weapons in NATO’s military strategy. Also, Russia’s invoking nuclear weapons in a regional crisis indicates the growing significance of nuclear weapons for the emerging great power competition.

Nuclear Rationale

At 5 am (Ukrainian time) on February 24, Russia launched a full-scale invasion of Ukraine. What was initially anticipated by Russia to be an unchallenging military adventure is building up to be a challenging and long-lasting military standoff as Russian troops are making much slower progress and facing mounting casualties.¹ In a thinly veiled nuclear threat, President Putin warned that any external interference would be “responded immediately” and will have unprecedented consequences.² As western countries swiftly imposed economic sanctions³ on Russia and transferred weapons and ammunition to Ukraine,⁴ Putin responded by increasing the readiness of Russian deterrence forces, putting nuclear command and control on ‘special service regime’.⁵

The nuclear brinkmanship demonstrated by Russia is a classic case of the stability-instability paradox.⁶ The cold war era concept argues that nuclear and conventional military balances are interrelated and interact in a manner such that the stability at the strategic balance of terror lowers the stability at the conventional level of violence and vice-versa.⁷ By signalling that any western intervention might lead to nuclear catastrophe, Russia is exploiting the nuclear stability—lack of incentive to carry out nuclear first strike or mutual assured destruction (MAD)—to

carry out conventional military operation. It is unlikely that Russia would use nuclear weapons against Ukraine or the United States; but it is trying to scare the west to back down through intimidation.⁸ Fortunately, the West understands Russian coercive tactics and has not raised the nuclear alert levels quite sensibly.⁹

What if Ukraine had nuclear weapons?

The argument that if Ukraine had not given up the nuclear arsenal (under Budapest Memorandum) inherited from the former Soviet Union after the dissolution of the USSR; the Russians would not have invaded Ukraine.¹⁰ In other words, nuclear-armed Ukraine would have deterred Russia from launching a military invasion. Experts take the above argument with scepticism since Ukraine never had control over the nuclear weapons stationed on its territory; Russia had the launch codes.¹¹ Also, it would have cost Ukraine quite a bit, both economically and in terms of international political repercussions, to hold on to nuclear weapons.¹²

Irrespective of what might have happened if Ukraine had nuclear weapons, the ill-informed debate has vital lessons for nuclear pariah states, nuclear hedgers, and nuclear aspirants: Nuclear pariah states like North Korea will reach the conclusion that they must never give up the nuclear button; Nuclear hedgers like Iran will conclude that they must keep hedging against the development of nuclear weapons; and the countries facing severe security concerns (such as South Korea, Japan, and Saudi Arabia) will intensify efforts in the direction of building nuclear weapons—the ultimate guarantor of state's security. Thus, the ongoing Russian military operation in Ukraine sets a wrong precedent for the nuclear non-proliferation regime.¹³ As aptly argued by a columnist in Bloomberg, “Putin has taught them that to disarm is a mistake, no matter what you're promised, because sooner or later you'll encounter somebody, well, like him.”¹⁴

Russian conventional capabilities and NATO's nuclear strategy

Western European countries lived under the constant threat of military invasion from their conventionally superior adversary—the Soviet Union—during the Cold War. To

deter an imminent conventional attack from its communist neighbour, NATO adopted the flexible response strategy in 1967.¹⁵ The strategy was designed to enhance deterrence at all levels: conventional, tactical, and strategic—by providing flexible nuclear response options. It envisioned asymmetrical response options against a large-scale conventional invasion by the Soviet Union. The centrality of nuclear weapons in NATO's military strategy reduced after the dissolution of the Soviet Union. The successor of the Soviet Union—the Russian Federation—was conventionally distraught and no match against the conventional capabilities of NATO.

The demonstration of western conventional strike capabilities during the NATO bombing of Yugoslavia and, more recently, the under-par performance of Russian conventional forces during the Georgia war produced a significant wake-up call and triggered the modernisation of Russian conventional forces.¹⁶ The Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2014 and the intervention in Syria from 2015 demonstrated Russia's modernised conventional capabilities. Russia has also shown its modern conventional military power in the ongoing “special military operation” in Ukraine.¹⁷ As Russia has closed the conventional gap with NATO and demonstrated enhanced conventional strike capabilities, some NATO countries might argue for increasing the prominence of nuclear weapons in NATO's defence strategy.

Nuclear weapons and great power competition

Nuclear weapons were central to the cold war competition. During the cold war, the idea of strategic stability revolved around nuclear parity or the nuclear balance of forces between the United States and the Soviet Union. However, with the end of the cold war and the dissolution of the USSR, nuclear weapons lost pre-eminence, and the focus shifted to conventional precision strike weapons. With the re-emergence of great power competition, nuclear weapons would likely again gain prominence. The signs of the increasing importance of nuclear weapons are already visible in the nuclear strategy of the United States, Russia, and China. The fact that nuclear deterrence has been invoked even in the ongoing regional crisis would bolster the increasing importance of nuclear weapons amidst intensifying great power competition.

NOTES

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