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Putin's Nuclear Brinkmanship: MAD and the Credibility Problem



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A month ago, Russia launched a special military operation in Ukraine under a veiled nuclear threat. A week into the operation, Russia publicly announced a nuclear alert and conducted nuclear drills, likely intended to deter western intervention in the crisis. Scholars and politicians have called the Russian nuclear threats a bluff and argued that nuclear use would be mutual suicide. However, the balance of resolve in Russia's favour has provided it with a coercive bargaining advantage. Russian nuclear brinkmanship demonstrates that rational state actors might be unwilling to launch a nuclear attack intentionally but quite willing to risk one and exploit the favourable balance of resolve and the risk-taking ability for coercive bargaining advantage in a crisis.

Russian Nuclear Policy

In June 2020, Russia released an unprecedented document, *Basic Principles of State Policy of the Russian Federation on Nuclear Deterrence*.¹ It was the first-ever document in Russia's history giving out the finer details of the Russian nuclear strategy and the concept of nuclear deterrence.

The document outlines that the Russian state policy on "nuclear deterrence is defensive by nature". Russia would maintain nuclear forces sufficient to deter potential adversaries from waging aggression against Russian territory or its allies and guarantee national sovereignty and territorial integrity. The decree further states that Russia considers nuclear weapons "exclusively as a means of deterrence, their use being an extreme and compelled measure."

The document clarifies that the Russian concept of nuclear deterrence is that of deterrence by punishment instead of deterrence by denial: "Nuclear deterrence is aimed to provide comprehension by a potential adversary of the inevitability of retaliation in the event of aggression against the Russian Federation or its allies". Also, unlike the 2014 military doctrine and the previous documents, which talk about predetermined or tailored damage in retaliation, the recent decree promises to inflict "unacceptable damage" in response to an attack by a potential adversary.

Some observers argued that the reference to the defensive nature of nuclear deterrence in the *Basic Principles of State Policy*, "inevitability of retaliation", and "guaranteed unacceptable damage" puts an end to conjecture about the offensive underpinning— a situation when Russia launches aggression and uses the threat of going nuclear to prevent western (US and NATO) intervention—of the Russian nuclear strategy.² However, this is what summarises the Russian nuclear playbook in Ukraine.

Nuclear deterrence, coercion and compellence

Putin's nuclear signalling in the Ukrainian operation is likely intended as a shield to keep the West out of Russia's special operation.³ On the day Russia launched the "special military operation" to demilitarise and 'de-nazify' Ukraine, President Putin threatened the potential interfering parties with consequences unforeseen in history, a veiled threat of nuclear catastrophe.⁴ Three days later, Putin put the Russian nuclear forces on 'special combat duty.'⁵ A week into the invasion, on March 1, Russia put its nuclear warships and mobile missile launchers on high alert and conducted drills to operate nuclear forces in stormy circumstances. The Russian message to the world is clear: 'we will do our thing and you will stay out of it — or else...'⁶

While President Biden has persistently declined to intervene in Ukraine, Russian nuclear threats are directed to deter further western support for Ukraine via weapons and arms transfers.⁷ They are also intended to compel the western powers to withdraw provocative sanctions and end indirect western support to Ukrainian military forces.⁸ The signal is also intended to coerce Ukrainians to capitulate to Russian demands, especially to give up the intention of joining NATO and to recognise Lugansk and Donetsk as independent sovereign states.⁹ Thus, Russia has instrumentalised the "fear of nuclear war to make others bow to its ambitions."¹⁰

The Russian tactics of employing nuclear weapons for deterrence, compellence, and coercion in a conventional conflict is a part of the nuclear playbook of great powers but not something specified or stipulated by the recent Russian nuclear decree. The analysis reveals the incoherence between Russian nuclear policy and practice and demonstrates that Russian nuclear weapons are not exclusively reserved for retaliation but also to facilitate the invasion of foreign territories.

Balance of Resolve and Nuclear Brinkmanship

Pertaining to the mutually assured destruction (MAD) regime between the United States and Russia, it can be argued that the Russian threats of nuclear use in a local conflict are not credible and any use of nuclear weapons might result in all-out nuclear warfare with an unprecedented catastrophe. In other words, Russian nuclear threats can be considered a bluff and it would not use nuclear weapons in the ongoing conflict. Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky recently expressed this sentiment in an interview with the German newspaper *Die Zeit*. He said that he thinks "that the threat of nuclear war is a bluff" and that the use of nuclear weapons "means the end for all sides, not just for the person using them." While the argument might sound theoretically correct, it might not play out precisely in a crisis.¹¹

The Russian political stakes in the ongoing conflict outweigh those of the Americans and the West.¹² The eastward expansion of NATO, the admission of Ukraine into NATO, and the hostile nature of Ukraine towards Russia and its expanding conventional-military capabilities threaten Russian security and core interests.¹³ For concerns regarding national interest, allies' security, and status and prestige, the United States might find it pertinent to intervene on behalf of Ukraine and force Russia to back down; however, not at the risk of a nuclear disaster. The higher Russian political stakes increase the Russian resolve to threaten nuclear weapons use, increase its risk-taking ability, and reduce its expected cost of the war. Although the balance of nuclear forces—numerical parity of strategic warheads between Russia and the US—and the prospect of mutually assured destruction render the Russian nuclear threats less credible and irrational because any nuclear exchange would threaten even Russia's destruction, the balance of resolve in favour of Russia provides it with a coercive bargaining advantage, if not credibility for nuclear-use.¹⁴

The underlying logic of nuclear risk-taking and coercive bargaining is not new and is explained by the nuclear brinkmanship theory.¹⁵ It argues that while a rational state actor might be unwilling to launch a nuclear attack intentionally, they would be quite willing to risk one. Thomas Schelling called the prospect of credibly threatening a nuclear attack "a threat that leaves something to chance." Indeed, Matthew Kroenig argues that "the nuclear revolution can be understood as a transformation of international politics from a competition in military capabilities to a competition in risk taking."¹⁶

As the world sleepwalks towards a new great power rivalry, the salience of nuclear signalling in a conventional crisis might increase and the competition in nuclear risk-taking may become a feature of the international security landscape.

NOTES

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⁹ Olga Olikier, "Putin's Nuclear Bluff", *Foreign Affairs*, March 11, 2022, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/ukraine/2022-03-11/putins-nuclear-bluff>. Accessed on March 11, 2022; Russian Federation, "Signing of documents recognising Donetsk and Lugansk People's Republics", February 21, 2022, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/67829>. Accessed on February 22, 2022.

¹⁰ Gressel, n. 6.

¹¹ Max Thornberry, "Zelensky says Putin's nuclear threats are a 'bluff'", *Washington Examiner*, March 10, 2022, <https://www.washingtonexaminer.com/policy/defense-national-security/zelensky-says-putins-nuclear-threats-are-a-bluff>. Accessed on March 14, 2022.

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