

Understanding Russia's Threat to Employ Nuclear Weapons in Its War Against Ukraine

THE ISSUE

The aim of U.S. policy ought to be to support to Ukraine and limit the scope of the conflict. In a national address, Russian President Vladimir Putin claimed the West was using the threat of nuclear weapons to blackmail Russia and that “those who try to blackmail us with nuclear weapons should know that the weathervane can turn and point towards them.” He declared, reinforcing his apparent resolve to employ nuclear weapons if necessary, “I am not bluffing.” Other government officials and Russian legislators and commentators have also suggested that Russia might employ nuclear weapons as part of its invasion of Ukraine.

Russian threats have spurred Western concerns about the threat of nuclear use or, worse, an expanding war and nuclear escalation. Based on years of study and assessment of Soviet and Russian nuclear weapons activities, consultation with other experts and reliable sources, and the current situation on the ground in Ukraine, there are some facts that ought to inform our understanding of the Russian threat.

DOES RUSSIA HAVE THE ABILITY TO EMPLOY TACTICAL NUCLEAR WEAPONS?

Yes. Russia has a large arsenal of tactical nuclear weapons—far larger in fact than those of the U.S. and NATO: an advantage over the U.S. and NATO in non-strategic nuclear weapons of 20:1 in Europe and 10:1 overall. Russian doctrine allows for the preemptive use of nuclear weapons in defense of Russian interests and territory. It also indicates that Russia may

believe it can employ nuclear weapons at the lower levels of the escalation ladder to compel the U.S. to back down rather than respond. Russian forces train for the use and employment of tactical nuclear weapons.

That said, no nation has ever employed tactical nuclear weapons in combat. All of the doctrine is untested. In particular, the theory of “escalating to deescalate,” employing weapons to cow an opponent, is also unproven. In contrast, most wargame exercises conclude that the use of nuclear weapons against a nuclear-armed opponent often leads to serious, if not uncontrolled, escalation.

Further, there are serious questions about whether current Russian forces are trained and equipped to operate in a nuclear environment, and the functional reliability of Russian tactical nuclear arms is unknown.

IS RUSSIA GOING TO EMPLOY NUCLEAR WEAPONS?

Ultimately, this is unknowable, but NATO has considerable experience and capability in monitoring and detecting *preparations* for the use of nuclear weapons. Publicly, NATO governments have stated that they have no indicators of impending use. At present, press reporting of nuclear-related operational activity has not been corroborated by Western officials.

CAN RUSSIA EFFECTIVELY EMPLOY TACTICAL NUCLEAR WEAPONS?

Probably not. Any weapon, including nuclear arms, is used according to the principle of “fire

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and maneuver.” Whether it is an atomic bomb or a hand grenade, the purpose of “fire” is to create conditions for force to maneuver to an objective. The Russians lack trained and ready armored forces and air superiority to exploit a nuclear strike. In fact, untrained Russian forces could panic and be even less combat effective. Further, the employment of tactical nuclear weapons is even more difficult while retreating with a rapidly changing front. Decades of NATO training and experience in planning and exercises during the Cold War reinforce the conclusion that Russian tactical employment would fare poorly. Finally, as winter weather approaches, offensive operations will become even more difficult.

WILL RUSSIA EMPLOY NUCLEAR WEAPONS?

This is ultimately a political decision, not a military one. A close analysis of Putin’s remarks does not suggest any clear “red line” in Ukraine. His threats are unspecific and vague, which suggests they could well be intended to intimidate the West.

Putin is desperate not to lose the war in Ukraine and lose power. He is likely to take every acceptable risk to hold strategic ground, which he would have to weigh against the poor chance that employment of nuclear weapons would be tactically effective and the geopolitical downsides of nuclear use. Almost assuredly, many nations would shift from sanctioning Russia to completely isolating Russia. If Putin were in danger of losing power, it is possible he could think that the use of nuclear weapons would make him look strong and cow opposition. It is also possible, however, that Russian troops would not carry out the order, which could accelerate his demise.

WOULD UKRAINE SURRENDER?

Using a limited number of tactical nuclear weapons is extremely unlikely to cause Ukraine to surrender. Ukrainian command and control is probably prepared to be resilient in any attack by Russian forces in theater. Other possible scenarios, including an attack on the capital or a demonstration detonation at sea or in an occupied area, are also not likely to break Ukrainian resolve.

WHAT WOULD NATO DO?

If a nuclear weapon struck NATO territory—an incredibly unlikely proposition—NATO would probably take a proportional response. This action would be consistent with what is publicly known of previous NATO planning and exercises. If weapons struck Ukraine, NATO would most likely redouble military and humanitarian aid to Ukraine and use additional policy tools to further isolate Russia. Neither of these outcomes would be beneficial for Russia or increase the likelihood of military success.

While U.S. and NATO allies should not seek to escalate conflict beyond the Ukraine theater, they should also not give in to “nuclear blackmail,” which would undermine NATO strategic deterrence. NATO should continue to support the self-defense of Ukraine and take prudent measures that include both conventional and strategic forces (nuclear arms and missile defense) to protect NATO territory against any nuclear threat. Ultimately, a nuclear conflict in Europe would only erode and undermine U.S. economic and national security interests. U.S. and NATO policy should seek to prevent any such conflict, not encourage it.