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Careful Responses:

NATO and Russian Nuclear Brinkmanship during the Early War in Ukraine

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Introduction

For more than seventy-five years the world has been haunted by the spectre of nuclear Armageddon. From the Cuban Missile Crisis to the current War in Ukraine, the risk, dangers, and implications of nuclear first use and proliferation have impacted the behaviour of nuclear armed and non-armed states alike. When Kim Jong-un threatened to unleash destruction through a nuclear strike “if provoked,” many commentators wondered if the North Korean dictator had gone crazy.¹ Once Vladimir Putin and other Russian officials began doing the same, some of the same questions were raised.² For why else would anyone threaten such a catastrophe? Why else would a world leader, the head of a nuclear weapons power, play such a risky and callous game with our specie’s very own survival? After all, is it not true that nuclear war “cannot be won and must never be fought”? The truth is of course more complicated, which is something that is worrying in and of itself. Kim Jong-un and Vladimir Putin both understand the risks and the dangerous game they play.³ Why then do the leaders of nuclear-armed states sometimes engaged in controlled escalations—in nuclear brinkmanship? Why did the Russian regime elect this course of action during the War in Ukraine? How did NATO, through some of its members, react?

This policy brief investigates the phenomenon of nuclear coercion through an analysis of two nuclear brinkmanship attempts by Russia and argues that they mostly failed because of the Allies’ de-escalatory but firm responses. Doing so, it highlights two weaknesses to the Western retorts. First, NATO failed to prevent the conflict from becoming polarized on a Cold War-reminiscent East-West basis. Second, its members neglected their role in reassuring their own population, leading to instances of media frenzies in response to nuclear threats of dubious credibility.⁴ This policy brief proposes a set of recommendations to address those two issues. It begins with a short overview of what nuclear coercion and brinkmanship mean.

Then, it details the two studied instances of attempted nuclear coercion during the War in Ukraine. Finally, it concludes with some



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policy recommendations on how to address the shadow of nuclear war in the twenty-first century in the context of future crises.

Nuclear Coercion: Does It Even Work?

Nuclear coercion is the capacity to compel another state to do something you want through brinkmanship, threats, and controlled escalation. It means using your nuclear arsenal to induce “changes [in your adversary’s behaviour] that serve [your] political interests.”⁵ There is considerable doubts over whether or not nuclear coercion actually works—indeed, its empirical record is spotty at best.⁶ Yet nuclear weapons have been branded as tools of “coercive diplomacy” that can be used to blackmail or intimidate your targets.⁷ What is clear is that states have attempted to use them to that end in the past, and they do impact how states comport themselves on the international stage and assess the risks linked to a given behaviour.⁸ Brinkmanship and its outcomes appear to depend on the felt and perceived *resolve* of the involved parties.⁹ How committed one camp is to a certain resolution appears to be the most important factor in assessing the outcome. In the case of the War in Ukraine, the puzzle at play then becomes how did each camp communicate their resolve and assess the other’s credibility, and what lessons can be learned from that instance of coercion.

Looking to the Recent Past for Future Answers

While lessons can and should be extracted from this instance of nuclear brinkmanship, their generalizability should not be overstated. Indeed, the study of nuclear weapons and their impact on the world is marred with an important problem: the fact that the number of cases than can be studied is, overall, severely limited. Thus, the insights that can be gleaned from those case studies are important, but also highly contextual. Factors such as psychology or new technologies can impact the overall outcome in a way that cannot be predicted by an older case. For this reason, this policy brief focuses on two recent periods of brinkmanship by Russia.

Russian Brinkmanship, the War in Ukraine, and NATO Responses

The two periods in question were chosen because they were the most salient, meaning that they are the two periods during which Russia’s nuclear signals were the clearest and most significant in intensity and number. The first was at the beginning of the war, when Russia sought to deter a direct intervention by NATO and limit its help to Ukraine. The second was in September and October 2022, when Russia claimed significant portions of Ukraine’s territory and tried to assert its ownership through nuclear blackmail.

The First Escalation: Deterring NATO Intervention

On January 27, 2022, the Deputy Chairman of the Russian Security Council, Dmitry Medvedev, claimed that Russia had the “right” to “use nuclear weapons in response to an existential threat.”¹⁰ This was the first signal for a total of twelve during the period from January 2022 to March 2022.¹¹ Similarly, Vladimir Putin also flexed his country’s nuclear muscles by comparing them to that of Europe.¹² On February 21st, Putin similarly claimed that Russia had to intervene in Ukraine since it was attempting to construct a nuclear delivery system, and on February 24th he threatened that anyone trying to “hinder” Russia would face “consequences that [they] have never encountered in [their] history.”¹³ Overall,

the nuclear signals shared common characteristics: they were aimed at the West (not at Ukraine), attempted to both legitimize the intervention and insulate it from a direct NATO repost, were rhetorical in nature, and every time garnered important mediatic attention. Yet at the same time their origin was varied: although Putin himself did pronounce some of them, less influential or marginalized members of his regime, such as Medvedev, received almost as much attention as the President.

The NATO reaction was careful and mostly de-escalatory, but assertive. On February 8th, French President Macron condemned Russia's threatening posture.¹⁴ His Foreign Minister, Le Drian, also reminded Putin through the media on February 24th that NATO also owned nuclear weapons. NATO Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg asserted that the Alliance would "do what is needed to protect all [its members] but [it would] not further escalate the tensions."¹⁵ NATO members such as Canada and Germany, on the other hand, were silent: their involvement with the War in Ukraine during this period remained focused on the conventional aspect of the conflict, leaving the issue of nuclear signalling to the Alliance's nuclear-armed members. This strategy mostly worked, in the sense that Western help to Ukraine was maintained. But it can also be argued that it worked from the Russian perspective: NATO did not intervene directly in Ukraine. In any case, two observations can here be made. First, the lack of official communication from some Western countries led to heightened anxiety about the prospect of nuclear war within their respective media ecosystems. Second, the West stood alone: while the entire world would be affected by nuclear use, only NATO members and allies of the United States reacted against Russia, while the non-aligned rest did not significantly engage with the issue.

The Second Escalation: Coercing Territories from Ukraine

During the second period, the target of Russia's nuclear signalling shifted from NATO to Ukraine itself. Indeed, September 2022 onward saw Russia employ "nuclear threats in an attempt to strongarm the government in Kyiv into acquiescing to the illegal annexation of four Ukrainian provinces."¹⁶ The scheme was straightforward: assert that the four provinces of Luhansk, Donetsk, Zaporizhzhia, and Kherson were now legally part of Russia, and then attempt to use the threat of Russia's arsenal to prevent Ukraine from military reclaiming them. Indeed, Putin affirmed on September 21st that Russia would "make use of all weapon systems available" against a "threat to [its] territorial integrity,"¹⁷ while Medvedev claimed on September 22nd that Russia's nuclear weapons "could be used to protect all of the territories that have joined [the Federation]."¹⁸ On September 24th, Foreign Minister Lavrov also claimed that its "entire territory is under the state's full protection," an oblique reference to the newly acquired provinces.¹⁹ These statements were aggressive and had a clear goal: coerce Ukraine into abandoning its lost territories, and induce cooperation from the rest of the world for this illegal seizure. In total, eight statements to that effect were made by various officials, each widely reported in the media.²⁰

Western reactions were rapid and widespread. On September 20th, Prime Minister Trudeau deemed Russia's actions "an irresponsible and dangerous escalation."²¹ On September 22nd, Foreign Minister Joly called Putin's rhetoric "irresponsible and unthinkable," but symptomatic of the fact that his regime was "cornered" and "isolated."²² German Chancellor Scholz called the threats "unacceptable,"²³ while his Defence Minister affirmed that nothing would "deter Germany's military support for Ukraine."²⁴ Finally, Stoltenberg

reasserted that “any use of nuclear weapons by Russia [would be] unacceptable and would have severe consequences” as it would “totally change the nature of the conflict.”²⁵ Through this response, NATO members demonstrated their resolve and that they would not back down from supporting Ukraine. No doubt this stemmed from Ukraine’s own refusal to accept the annexation and be coerced into abandoning its own territories. Yet the conclusion here was clear: this attempt failed, in great part because of the united displayed by NATO and Ukraine in their response. At the same time, their governments’ engagement with the media on those issues stymied the frenzies that could have been created by the fear of nuclear warfare again.

Policy Recommendations

Janice Gross Stein argued that in terms of escalation management, the War in Ukraine demonstrated how the West, led by the United States and President Biden, succeeded at “learning by doing.”²⁶ While it is true that NATO did obtain some success in resisting the Russian nuclear threats, in this case the ‘good enough’ should not be the enemy of the ‘better.’ Important lessons can and should be drawn from the events of 2022. This policy brief has highlighted a few of them, including the fact that the West failed at preventing an international polarization around the War in Ukraine, and thus the reaction to Russia’s nuclear threats, that its governments allowed their respective media ecosystems to enter frenzies over threats that lacked credibility, and finally that careful resistance to nuclear threats is easier said and done when the Alliance presents a united, unanimous front. Accordingly, it makes the following recommendations:

1. Western states should attempt to de-polarize the issue of nuclear threats in the context of the War in Ukraine and elsewhere. In other words, they should attempt in the future to build more multilateral and diverse responses to nuclear threats. While difficult, this goal could be accomplished through serious and renewed engagement with the issue of nuclear disarmament since its goodwill with the non-aligned TPNW members is currently at a nadir. As long as NATO is perceived as a nuclear alliance (and thus, part of the problem), it will find difficult any attempt at gaining the support of non-Western countries against Russia.
2. Western states should play a more active role in responding to threats, including within their media ecosystem to reassure their own population. Indeed, the secrecy that surrounds nuclear weapons leads to much uncertainty. Yet successful deterrence rests on clear signals, the sharing of information, and open communication. Western governments should play a role in explaining those issues to the media and sharing concrete risk assessments. Transparency should be the goal.
3. Western states need to “pick and choose” what their primary goal is: to succeed at building a world free of nuclear weapons, or to maintain the integrity of their deterrence posture. Refusing to select one of those two goals and rhetorically espousing the two leads to incoherent policy-making that harms NATO’s credibility with non-nuclear non-aligned members of the TPNW, and highlights how nuclear-armed states have neglected the disarmament pillar of the TNP.

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Endnotes

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