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Could Russia Use the Nuclear Option?

Using nuclear weapons is highly unlikely but not entirely ruled out.

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Sergei Malgavko / TASS

The threat of a nuclear strike on Ukraine is being hotly discussed in the media and social networks. But there are reasons to be both skeptical and wary of this threat.

But first, a caveat. While the fighting that began on Feb. 24 continues in Ukraine, speculation about a possible escalation of the armed conflict to war with nuclear weapons seems counterproductive and irresponsible.

First of all, in an armed confrontation, threats of nuclear escalation, no matter who publicly voices them — a state official, a state media employee, or an expert — play into the hands of the attacker as they keep the defenders and their partners from taking strong measures.

There is always the possibility that talking about the nuclear threat might demotivate the defending side.

Second, speculation that Russia could commit a nuclear strike is not based on real-world data. In fact, there is even very little verified information in the public domain about what Russia's goals are in Ukraine and more broadly in its rivalry with the West and how it intends to achieve them.

There have been many justifications from the Russian side for the invasion of Ukraine. Given the long list of possible reasons, it's impossible to determine which one — perhaps not expressed — actually prompted Russia to embark on this military campaign.

Furthermore, observers quickly found they did not know the decision-making process in Russia. Is the will of a single commander-in-chief enough for a country to launch a nuclear strike, or is it still a group decision? Can someone other than the president give a categorical "no" to the nuclear option and remove the issue from the agenda?

Given the spate of contradictory statements by government officials that have had little or no correspondence with reality, how can we determine if the next threats or, conversely, assurances that Russia does not intend to launch nuclear strikes are true?

No information in the public domain provides a definitive answer can be given to any of these questions.

And so, without judgments disconnected from reality that play into the hands of one side or the other, this text is about why the nuclear threat is perceived with both skepticism and wariness.

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Russia continues to refer to the fighting in Ukraine as a special military operation. This status does not imply a general mobilization and it signals that, from Russia's perspective, there is no legal basis for the use of nuclear weapons. As long as it remains a special operation, for Russia it is a local conflict with limited objectives and moderate risks.

Neither President Vladimir Putin nor his ministers have spoken about annexing the territories of the so-called DNR and LNR and the temporarily occupied lands of Ukraine. So when Russian and DNR and LNR military units repel counterattacks by Ukrainian forces, they are defending territory that does not belong to Russia.

It is true that head of the ruling United Russia party recently said that "Russia is here forever" in Kherson and that Russian currency is being put into circulation on occupied territory in Ukraine. It's possible that Vladimir Putin may change his mind and annex the occupied territories, as well as the DNR and LNR. Then Ukraine's attempts to recapture them, along with Crimea, would give Russia a formal reason to resort to nuclear weapons for its own defense. But so far these statements and actions have not been formalized either politically or legally.

Based on the current situation, there is even less likelihood of Russian nuclear strikes against NATO member states, despite the Russian mass media's rhetoric. At the beginning of the armed conflict, Vladimir Putin threatened unprecedented consequences for attempts to

intervene from abroad. This warning had an impact, strengthening the position of Western officials who were against direct military involvement. Meanwhile, allied and non-allied countries have found ways to provide significant military and economic assistance to Ukraine without sending their troops.

On the one hand, the Russian side should be satisfied; after all, no NATO troops have been sent to Ukraine. On the other hand, the prospects for Russia's military campaign are dimmer as the foreign aid flooding into Ukraine either maintains or improves its military capabilities. It is unclear what role Russia's nuclear weapons could play other than deterring NATO's direct military intervention.

Clearly, as long as they play a deterrent role, Western countries will remain careful not to provoke a nuclear escalation. If Russia were to follow the irresponsible calls by some in the Russian media and launch a nuclear strike against a NATO country, nuclear weapons would turn from a deterrent into a means of active fighting. In addition the “special operation” status of the conflict does not give grounds for aggression against third countries, especially with nuclear weapons.

"*A nuclear attack is a red line. If Russia crosses it, nothing would keep Western states from directly entering the conflict on the side of Ukraine.* "

This would pose a threat of nuclear catastrophe for the whole world and endanger the future of Russia and the political configuration of power that Putin has been building for so long.

Would a Russian nuclear strike against Ukraine be a red line, too? It is not clear. In the U.S., there is a widespread belief that the White House administration would be under enormous pressure to enter into an armed conflict on the side of Ukraine.

But it is difficult to predict how the U.S. and its allies would ultimately react, apart from increasing sanctions pressure on Russia and its further isolation.

Why would Russia use nuclear weapons as part of a special military operation in Ukraine? With a great stretch of the imagination, there are at least two scenarios that would make sense militarily.

The first is to be able to conquer the urban centers and force Kyiv to sign a peace on Russia's terms (following the example of the U.S. atomic bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki to end WWII in the Pacific theater).

In the second scenario, it would be done if the general-purpose forces of Russia, the DNR and LNR are not enough to deter massive counterattacks by Ukrainian forces.

That is, Russia could use nuclear weapons as a countervalue attack in the first case or a counterforce attack in the second.

The complete destruction of Ukrainian cities would seem to support the possibility of the first scenario. If these weren’t isolated cases carried out by commanders on the battlefield but

rather evidence that the Russian side tolerates such destruction and collateral civilian casualties, then it is not unrealistic that Russia could use more powerful weapons to reduce casualties among Russian, DNR and LNR military personnel.

The second scenario seems quite disconnected from the situation on the ground. The last time such scenarios of nuclear war were considered was during the rivalry between NATO and the Warsaw Pact military blocs during the Cold War. What is happening in Ukraine does not remotely resemble the conditions of those plans in scale, form or content.

An argument against both scenarios is the fact that the Russian side continues to deny rocket and bomb attacks on civilians and blames the Ukrainian military instead. The Russian military does not admit to using weapons subject to international bans, such as cluster bombs. The policy of denial is so that Russia can try to normalize or at least improve relations with various countries when the fighting in Ukraine stops.

If Russia uses nuclear weapons in Ukraine, it will not be possible to deny it or blame it on the Ukrainian military. Whatever faint hopes that Russia has for a future improvement of relations with the West would be completely destroyed.

"*Under current conditions, there is no military or political basis for using nuclear weapons against Ukraine and even less against NATO.*"

However, if the war goes badly for Russia and the likely possibility that hostilities might move to territories that Russia considers its own, such as Crimea, and that Russia would be completely isolated politically and economically, Moscow will have more serious arguments for at least nuclear blackmail.

So why does Putin make statements about the nuclear option? We might speculate that the Russian authorities expect to avoid the worst-case scenarios for themselves by covering themselves with a "nuclear shield." But this shield will only work — more or less — if Russia does not use nuclear weapons.

The views expressed in opinion pieces do not necessarily reflect the position of The Moscow Times.

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