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How Should the West Respond to Russia's Missile Threats?

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An RS-24 Yars missile system, a precursor of the Oreshnik. **Russian Defense Ministry**

Since the start of this month, global anxiety about the prospect of nuclear war has risen to levels not seen since the end of the Cold War. But despite the headlines, in reality, the risk of nuclear war still seems very low in reality and, importantly, has not increased despite the recent posturing of the Kremlin.

In mid-November, the Biden administration finally approved Ukraine's use of its ATACMS (Army Tactical Missile System) against targets inside Russia. This was followed shortly afterward by Britain's approval of similar use for its Storm Shadow missiles.

President Vladimir Putin responded quickly and dramatically. First, he announced a revised Russia's nuclear doctrine. Then, Moscow used a nuclear-capable hypersonic Oreshnik missile against Ukraine and followed up with a statement asserting their right to strike the military installations of those states allowing Ukraine to use their weapons to attack Russia.

The world responded with alarm. The day's news around the globe was dominated by huge headlines about nuclear strikes and images of ICBMs. Many people in the West were understandably frightened. Russian TV reported all this with relish.

But Putin's threats and the use of an apparently new missile do not suggest that escalation to nuclear use is likely. On the contrary, they are a strong indication that it is unlikely. The Russian response seems to show that Biden has finally called Putin's nuclear bluff over yet another so-called red line.

Since the start of Russia's 2022 full-scale invasion of Ukraine, the Biden administration has been deeply concerned about the risk of escalation, in particular the possibility that U.S. assistance to Kyiv could trigger a nuclear response by the Kremlin.

As a result, the White House has been very cautious in what it has permitted Kyiv to do with U.S.-supplied arms – much too cautious for many critics inside and outside Ukraine. For months, it resisted calls to allow the use of long-range missiles against targets inside Russia that are used to devastate Ukrainian cities.

Given this, the White House's decision to reverse this ban indicates a high degree of confidence that Russia will not respond with any kind of nuclear weapon against Ukraine or any NATO state. One reason for this may be the restraining influence of China, which has not approved of the Kremlin's nuclear threats and on which Russia is now so economically and politically dependent.

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But beyond this, it looks as if, just as in crisis periods of the Cold War, the terrifying character of nuclear war is helping deterrence to work. Given the stakes involved with nuclear weapons both the U.S. and Russia have extremely strong incentives to communicate clearly with each other, even in circumstances where one side is trying to use nuclear threats to compel the other, as Putin has been doing.

From early in the war, Washington has made the consequences of Russian nuclear use clear to the Kremlin. The details are necessarily secret. But the Biden administration warned publicly in 2022 of the "catastrophic consequences" for Russia if any kind of nuclear weapon was used.

The need to avoid potentially fatal misperception explains why Russia warned the U.S. in advance of the Oreshnik missile strike and its non-nuclear character. Both states want transparent communication in situations, such as the launch of a hypersonic missile, where misunderstanding could lead to a rapid escalation, and perhaps triggering an accidental nuclear war.

Putin's response this week to greater U.S. resolve has been to use doctrines, missiles, and media to signal his anger that his bluff has been called. That anger is in itself dangerous and should be taken seriously, but it doesn't indicate that the nuclear risk has grown.

That seems likely to be why the Russian media are so interested in Western reporting of Putin's latest actions. Since nuclear threats are now proving less effective in deterring the

White House, there seems to be an attempt to re-establish the power to coerce the U.S., Britain, and other Western states by generating public panic that will put pressure on governments.

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Finally, part of the anxiety of the last two weeks seems to be linked to the idea evident in some quarters that the threat from Russia is connected solely to the West's assistance to Ukraine. It would be a mistake for the West to believe that Russia's hostility would reduce or disappear if the West limited or withdrew its support to Ukraine.

Western policymakers and citizens need to understand that the Russian government's hostility to the West is not going to decrease if the U.S. and Britain think again about long-range missiles. The idea that the West, and particularly the nefarious "Anglo-Saxons", are the enemy is now fundamental to Putin's presidency. The characterization of the West as an existential threat to Russia is one of its main ideological props. As long as Putin remains president it is very hard to see that changing because there is little for him to replace it with. The only thing that Western governments and citizens can do is decide how they protect themselves, and their allies, from that hostility.

As frightening as it is, the refusal to give in to nuclear blackmail is an essential part of that. After a thirty-year break, it seems clear that Cold War-style deterrence is back for now. Whether it will still function after Donald Trump's return to the White House in January, when U.S. policy is expected to take a sharp pivot towards a more Kremlin-friendly approach, is less clear.

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