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RUSSIA'S NUCLEAR MESSAGING DURING THE 2022 WAR IN UKRAINE

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Russia invaded Ukraine on February 24, 2022, with the invasion being accompanied by a marked increase in nuclear messaging. Since then, nuclear messaging has been a permanent, albeit variable, characteristic of Russia's war against Ukraine. Russian officials have issued nuclear threats on various occasions, and the prospect of Russia using nuclear weapons in its war against Ukraine has become a widely debated subject among Western experts and policymakers. This is clearly a subject warranting further analysis. The aim of the article is to determine if Russian officials are using rhetoric that goes beyond the Russian nuclear doctrine. While Russia has made its nuclear doctrine public, the question remains about the extent to which official documents are a constraint on key Russian decisionmakers.

This article also explores whether Russia's nuclear messaging has succeeded in terms of preventing its NATO adversaries from providing military and other assistance to Ukraine. The first section looks at Russia's nuclear policy, that is, the main documents which define nuclear weapons use in Russia. The second section looks at Russian officials' nuclear rhetoric since the Russian invasion in Ukraine. The third section evaluates the effects of Russia's nuclear messaging. The article concludes that Russia has issued nuclear threats on numerous occasions during its military aggression against Ukraine with the aim of preventing Western military, economic and other assistance to Ukraine. In this regard, Russia scored some early successes, but the effects of Russia's nuclear messaging have weakened over time. Meanwhile, Russia has taken measures aimed at reducing the likelihood that it would have to resort to tactical nuclear weapons. It remains to be seen, however, whether Russia would resort to nuclear blackmail if/when facing the prospect of being defeated decisively by the Ukrainian military.

Keywords: nuclear messaging, nuclear blackmail, nuclear doctrine, nuclear weapons, Russia, Ukraine, NATO.

Russia's Nuclear Doctrine

Key elements of Russia's nuclear doctrine have been outlined in several official documents. In 2000, Russia adopted the *National Security Concept of the Russian Federation*. It describes possible threats and the ways in which Russia would defend its national interests. In 2014, Russia adopted *The Military Doctrine of the Russian Federation* which describes military policy and the deployment of forces in peacetime and wartime situations. Russia's nuclear policy (and the thinking that supports it) is also partially outlined in *Russia's Naval Doctrine until 2030* which was adopted in 2017. In 2020, Russia adopted a document titled *On Basic Principles of State Policy of the Russian Federation on Nuclear Deterrence*. This is the main (and the most recent) policy document which defines how Russia would use its nuclear weapons.

Russia's *National Security Concept* stipulates that nuclear weapons are to be primarily used for the purpose of deterrence, that is, their primary function is to prevent aggression against the Russian Federation and its allies. It states that Russia will consider using military force, including nuclear weapons, only if all other measures aimed at resolving a crisis have been exhausted or ineffective (*National Security Concept of the Russian Federation, 2000*). The *2014 Military Doctrine of Russia* states that "The Russian Federation reserves the right to use nuclear weapons in response to the use of nuclear and other types of weapons of mass destruction against it and/or its allies, as well as in the event of aggression against the Russian Federation with the use of conventional weapons when the very existence of the state is at stake." (*The Military Doctrine of the Russian Federation, 2014*). Its new *Nuclear Deterrence* document, which was published in 2020, defines the conditions under which Russia could use nuclear weapons more precisely. The document states that Russia could use nuclear weapons, 1) if there is information on a launch of ballistic missiles on the territory of Russia or its allies, 2) if nuclear weapons are used against Russia or its allies, 3) if the attack of an adversary could undermine the ability of Russia's nuclear forces to respond, 4) if there is an attack on Russia with conventional weapons and the very existence of the state is threatened (*Basic Principles of State Policy of the Russian Federation on Nuclear Deterrence, 2020*).

Having warned the West against interfering with Russia's 'special military operation' on February 24, the Russian president Vladimir Putin announced the placing of

Russia's nuclear forces on high alert three days later. Although this statement re-emphasized the nuclear aspect of Russia's 'special military operation' and the confrontation between Russia and the West, it did not have far-reaching implications for the readiness of Russia's nuclear forces. In addition, there were no reports of tactical nuclear weapons being transferred close to Ukraine or readied for launch. On February 24, V.Putin said: "No matter who tries to stand in our way, or all the more so create threats for our country and our people, they must know that Russia will respond immediately, and the consequences will be such as you have never seen in your entire history" (*Address by the President of the Russian Federation*, 2022). This announcement was perceived in the West as being aimed at deterring the West from helping Ukraine militarily, and has not been the last statement of this nature during the war. Similar announcements signal that Russia may or may not follow its nuclear doctrine, fuelling speculation that Russia may resort to nuclear weapons if it fails to achieve its political and military objectives in Ukraine. Thus, Russia's nuclear rhetoric warrants further analysis.

Russia's nuclear rhetoric

In the early stages of the 'special military operation' on February 27, V.Putin said that "western countries are not only taking unfriendly economic actions against our country, but leaders of major NATO countries are making aggressive statements about our country". This announcement provided the message that Russia was addressing its nuclear messaging at the West. On April 27, V.Putin announced: "if anyone intends to intervene from the outside and create a strategic threat to Russia that is unacceptable to us, they should know that our retaliatory strikes will be lightning-fast." (Bugos, 2022). Later at the International Economic Forum in June at St. Petersburg, V.Putin announced that Russia was not threatening, but would use nuclear weapons if its sovereignty was threatened (Russia will use nuclear weapons if its sovereignty is threatened - Putin, 2022). In September, V.Putin said that "...our country also has a variety of weapons of destruction and in some areas even more modern than those of NATO countries and if the territorial integrity of our country is threatened we will, without question, use all the means at our disposal to protect Russia and our people. This is not a bluff". This statement came shortly before Russia announced the annexation of the four regions of Ukraine into Russia (*The Telegraph*, 2022). V.Putin was not the only one to issue these kinds of statements, as other Russian officials also made statements regarding the use of nuclear weapons.

Kristin Ven Bruusgaard indicates that Vladimir Putin cannot launch a nuclear strike on his own. There are three nuclear briefcases in Russia. One is for the President, one for the Defence Minister, and the last one is for the Chief of General Staff. Two of them are required to launch a nuclear strike (Bruusgaard, 2022). To analyse the seriousness of V.Putin's threats, we have to examine the statements of two other officials with nuclear briefcases. Russian Defense Minister Sergey Shoigu said that Russia had no need to use nuclear weapons in Ukraine because it would be able to achieve its stated objectives by conventional military means (*Defence Minister Shoigu Says Russia has no Need to use Nuclear Weapons in Ukraine*, 2022). He also warned that there was a significant threat that Ukraine could develop nuclear weapons and build missiles capable of carrying nuclear warheads. However, he did not specify how Russia would prevent that from happening. The Chief of the Russian General Staff Valery Gerasimov has been the least vocal when it comes to nuclear messaging, as he has not said anything specific regarding potential nuclear weapon use during the war. However, he announced in 2021, that the conditions for Russia using nuclear weapons were strictly limited. He reaffirmed Russia's commitment to its Nuclear Doctrine. From his point of view, nuclear capabilities are mainly for deterrence and upholding strategic stability (*Russia's Nuclear Policy Remains Defensive - Chief of the General Staff*, 2021).

Other officials without nuclear briefcases have also made statements on Russian nuclear policy. Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov stated on 25 April that nuclear war must never be fought, however, the risks were high, and the threat was real (Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov's interview with Channel One's The Great Game political talk show, Moscow, April 25, 2022). At the Conference on Disarmament, S.Lavrov claimed that Russia would take the necessary steps to prevent Ukraine from acquiring a nuclear weapon. He expressed the view that has long since become one of Russia's grievances against the West, namely, that nuclear sharing between NATO members was a violation of the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (*Statement by Sergey Lavrov at the Conference on Disarmament, Geneva, 1 March 2022*, 2022). V.Putin's spokesman Dmitry Peskov admitted that the outcome of the operation in Ukraine will not affect the usage of nuclear weapons. He did not elaborate whether Russia would use nuclear weapons in case Russia loses the war (Putin's spokesman Dmitry Peskov on Ukraine and the West: *Don't Push us Into the Corner*, 2022). D.Peskov has indicated that Russia would use

nuclear weapons only if it faced an existential threat (Amanpour and Company, 2022). Maria Zakharova claimed that Russia and United States share a joint responsibility to keep the world away from nuclear war and that it depends on how the United States can coexist with Russia and abandon its claims to world hegemony (*Briefing by Foreign Ministry Spokeswoman Maria Zakharova, St Petersburg, June 15, 2022, 2022*).

Deputy Chairman of the Russian Security Council Dmitry Medvedev has stated that, if the West tries to punish Russia over Ukraine, it risks a global catastrophe (*Опасная риторика: из России опять звучат ядерные угрозы, 2022*). He added that the Russian nuclear doctrine does not require an enemy state to use nuclear forces first. Russia could strike, if it faced a conventional threat (Boffey, 2022). D.Medvedev also claimed that Russia could attack Ukraine with nuclear weapons if it was cornered. He added that NATO allies would not dare to intervene in such a scenario (Faulconbridge and Davis, 2022). Statements by D.Medvedev signal that the scenario mentioned in Russia's nuclear doctrine may apply to the war in Ukraine. Assistant to the President of the Russian Federation Vladimir Medinsky said in March that the West is pushing Russia to its destruction and that the very existence of the country is at stake (*Мединский: Запад подталкивает Россию к разрушению политической системы и всей страны, 2022*). Similar comments lead us to the conclusion that Medinsky is referring to the nuclear doctrine of Russia and that his message is that nuclear weapons are on the table because the existence of the state is being threatened by the West in the present conflict.

Russia has also issued nuclear signals in the United Nations (UN) context. Russian Deputy Ambassador to UN Dmitry Polyanskiy in an interview with *Sky News* said that, if Russia was provoked by NATO, it had the right to use nuclear weapons (*Russian Diplomat: If NATO Threatens us, We have the Right to Press the Nuclear Button, 2022*). A day after V.Putin announced nuclear forces to be on high alert, the Russian Permanent Representative to the UN Vassily Nebenzia claimed that V.Putin gave this order because of aggressive statements from the West. He responded that this action was only for deterrence purposes (*Press Conference by Permanent Representative Vassily Nebenzia Dedicated to the End of the Russian Presidency of the UNSC in February 2022*).

There are several Russian officials who are playing down the severity of nuclear threats. For example, the Deputy Director of the Foreign Ministry's Information and Press Department Alexey Zaitsev said that

Russian TV channels have nothing to do with the announcements of officials. He repeated that nuclear war must never be fought and that there are clear lines defined in the nuclear doctrine of Russia (*Briefing by Deputy Director of the Foreign Ministry's Information and Press Department Alexey Zaitsev, Moscow, May 6, 2022*). D.Polyansky, First Deputy Permanent Representative of the Russian Federation to the UN has said that Russia does not have a rational basis for the use of nuclear weapons in Ukraine. He admitted that there were specific criteria for the use of such weapons, and none of these apply to Ukraine (*Полянский: данные о возможности применения РФ ядерного оружия на Украине безосновательны, 2022*). Russia's Ambassador to the UK Andrei Kelin in an interview with the *BBC* said that nuclear options have nothing to do with the current Russian operation in Ukraine and that there are very strict rules for the use of nuclear weapons (*Russia Won't use Tactical Nuclear Weapons in Ukraine, says Ambassador to UK, 2022*). Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Sergey Ryabkov has said that the prevention of a nuclear conflict is a top priority of Russian foreign policy. It is important to maintain dialogue between nuclear states especially when the situation in Ukraine is unpredictable (*Russia Prioritizes Efforts to Prevent Direct Nuclear Conflict, Senior Diplomat Emphasizes, 2022*).

Some of the announcements have been controversial and ambiguous. For example, D.Peskov has said on numerous occasions that the outcome of the operation in Ukraine will not be a reason for the use of nuclear weapons. Russia could use such weapons only in a case of existential threat. However, V.Putin used the term "existential threat" on February 24 to describe NATO's enlargement and that it has led Russia to start a special military operation. A few days later, he announced a high alert in the nuclear forces giving a clear indication what those consequences might be (Kacprzyk, 2022).

Comments from V.Medinsky and D.Medvedev indicate that the conditions in the nuclear doctrine may be pushed to the limit in the present conflict in Ukraine. V.Putin, with his rhetoric, has seeded doubt on whether Russia would follow its nuclear doctrine. Russia may refer to its nuclear doctrine if V.Putin equals the existence of the Russian state with the survival of his regime. In such a case, the use of nuclear weapons could be used according to the doctrine. This is just one possibility for how nuclear doctrine may be interpreted. Although it may seem that Russia's nuclear doctrine, which stipulates the possibility that nuclear weapons could be used in a conventional conflict, represents a serious problem for Euro-

pean security, the danger, however, may be the exact opposite. Namely, Russian officials who may ignore the doctrine when facing the prospect of a military defeat in Ukraine. For example, if newly occupied and annexed territories in Ukraine are perceived as Russian territories, then a conventional attack on Russia could be sufficient reason to use nuclear forces. V.Putin has already announced that annexed territories will be defended as Russian territory and that he is not bluffing. In the months that followed the formal annexation of Ukraine's four regions, Russia has lost control over the city of Kherson, and this loss did not elicit nuclear signalling, let alone the use of tactical nuclear weapons. However, V.Putin has changed the interpretation of the nuclear doctrine by making threats about "consequences that the world has never seen", and the process of Ukraine wresting control over the occupied territories is likely to be fraught with danger.

The results of Russian nuclear messaging

Has Russia's nuclear blackmail succeeded? To answer this question, it is necessary to examine the aims of Russia's nuclear messaging and the extent to which those aims have helped Russia's 'special military operation'. A number of aims set by Russia can be identified. First, Russia's main aim was to deter the West from intervening in its conflict with Ukraine. This meant deterring the West not only from direct military involvement, but also from preventing arms and ammunition supplies, as well as economic aid, that would help Ukraine in the war. Second, Russia's aim was to deter the West from implementing economic sanctions on Russia. Although economic sanctions are rarely enough to change the behaviour of autocracies, sanctions have had a serious influence on Russia's economy, and may undermine not only its war effort, but also V.Putin's public support at home. Third, Russia's nuclear messaging was aimed at Western governments in that they would prioritize their own security rather than help Ukraine. Fourth, nuclear blackmail aimed to provide Russia with an opportunity to wage conventional war against Ukraine under a nuclear shield. Putin has warned other states that intervention in this war would bring serious consequences, referring indirectly to nuclear weapons.

Arguably, Russia has two assumptions in its use of nuclear blackmail. First, it hoped that the U.S. and its

allies would back down in the face of nuclear threats and that the public would put pressure on their governments to stop supporting Ukraine. If anything, nuclear blackmail would give Russia enough time to complete the 'special military operation'. By the time that the collective West had its act together, the supposition was that Kyiv would have already fallen. This did not happen, but the nuclear signalling was supposed to delay the West's response. The second is that Western political unity would collapse in the face of nuclear threats (Khapaeva, 2022).

Both perspectives should be examined to measure the success of the nuclear messaging. Russian officials have claimed that its attempts to deter the West have succeeded. For example, D.Medvedev has claimed that the increase in readiness of nuclear forces has deterred the United States and its allies from implementing a no-fly zone over Ukraine. NATO and the U.S. have not directly intervened in the conflict with their armed forces. Although Ukraine has received decisive military and economic assistance, some types of military assistance have been clearly off-limits, such as Western-produced fighter jets, main battle tanks, and certain types of missiles for the HIMARS systems.

From the Western perspective, Russia has not fully achieved its objectives. Russia's nuclear messaging has not prevented the West from implementing economic and other sanctions on Russia and sending weapons supplies to Ukraine (Kacprzyk, 2022). There is no obligation for NATO to intervene in the conflict because Ukraine is not a member state of NATO. A no-fly zone over Ukraine was clearly off-limits, as it would be a direct intervention by the U.S. and its allies. Russia's nuclear messaging has been rather unsuccessful because the West has increased its support for Ukraine. Germany even changed its previous policy and began to supply arms to Ukraine. Russia's nuclear blackmail also did not prevent Sweden and Finland from applying to join NATO. The main result is that the West has not backed down in front of Russian nuclear messaging.

Although it seems that Russia's nuclear messaging has not reached all of its objectives, the West should not ignore Russia's nuclear messaging, because no one is aware of the extent of losses that Russia is prepared to suffer in Ukraine, before it may decide to use nuclear weapons to turn around its failing military operation. The key reason why the collective West has not yielded in the face of Russia's nuclear threats is that it would set a dangerous precedent that would be noted by revisionist powers in

other parts of the world. While the risks for nuclear war remain low, the Alliance must be ready for escalation scenarios.

Conclusions

Russia has communicated its nuclear capabilities extensively over the past year, with Russia's nuclear communication intensifying after its invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. Russia's President V.Putin has been the key communicator, but many other Russian officials have also been involved in nuclear messaging. A variety of Russian officials have offered somewhat conflicting messages on Russia's potential use of nuclear weapons in Ukraine. D.Medvedev has claimed that Russia may use nuclear weapons if it is pushed beyond its limits in Ukraine. V.Medinsky has warned that Ukraine, with its orientation to the West, is an existential threat to Russia. Thus, facing the clear prospect of military defeat and losing Ukraine to the West could pose an existential threat to Russia. Arguably, existential threats may warrant a nuclear response to resolve the conflict on terms favourable to Russia. D.Polyanskiy, V.Nebenzia as well as S.Shoigu and V.Gerasimov, also refer to the nuclear doctrine, but apart from D.Medvedev and V.Medinsky they do not see how a nuclear war scenario could take place in Ukraine. They have maintained the position that nuclear forces are only for the purpose of deterrence.

V. Putin, with his rhetoric, has set doubt on whether Russia would follow its nuclear doctrine, due to his expansion of the interpretation of the doctrine, with his rhetoric of threatening to use nuclear weapons if other states intervene in Ukraine. V.Putin has said that the newly annexed territories would be perceived as part of Russia, and he has given an indication that the nuclear doctrine will be applied to them. However, Russia's policies, such as the September decision to initiate military mobilization, have aimed to avoid (or at least postpone) the use of nuclear weapons.

In terms of the aims that Russia has tried to achieve with nuclear blackmail, Russia has been less than fully successful. Despite some early successes at the start of the war (such as the outright refusal of NATO member states to enforce a no-fly zone in Ukraine), Russia has not managed to coerce the West from refraining its arming of Ukraine and imposing painful economic sanctions against Russia. In addition, nuclear threats have not prevented Sweden and Finland from applying for membership of NATO.

The West has not backed down in front of Russia's nuclear blackmail. Thus, Russia's nuclear messaging does not qualify as being a case of successful nuclear blackmail.

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