



## Forum for American Leadership

### **Preventing the Next Escalation in Ukraine and Beyond—Deterring Russian Nuclear or Chemical Weapon Use**

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The Administration set out to deter the current Russian campaign against Ukraine by promising a series of “crippling” economic sanctions if, and only if, Russia went ahead with its attack. The world continues to witness the horrifying and tragic consequences of President Biden’s failure to deter Russian President Vladimir Putin’s invasion. And even though many aspects of the Administration’s response since February 24 merit applause, there is still the question of whether much of the destruction and loss of life could have been avoided with the right strategy of deterrence.

A new concern has emerged: does Russia’s weak and feeble military campaign increase the risk of escalation, including the use of weapons of mass destruction (WMD)? The fact that Russia is at risk of losing a conventional military conflict to Ukraine, and possibly Ukrainian territory Moscow has held since 2014, raises the risk that Russia will respond with nuclear or chemical use. These circumstances are precisely within the scope of [Russian military doctrine](#), the so-called doctrine of “escalate to de-escalate” or “escalate to win”. The [corrupt thug in the Kremlin](#) has been clearly messaging the same. Our [senior intelligence leaders](#) have been clear that the risk of such an escalation is rising.

The use of a nuclear or chemical weapon by Russia in Ukraine would be a game changer for the current conflict and future of warfare. Nuclear weapons use would have serious implications for U.S. interests, including potential environmental devastation for NATO states, likely irreparable damage to U.S. nonproliferation efforts, and breaking the 75-year taboo against nuclear weapons use that the United States has worked to maintain. Chemical weapons use would reinforce battlefield-use after the brutal Assad regime weakened the nearly 100-year taboo against the use of chemical weapons, as well as Putin’s multiple tactical uses, including against Russian dissident Alexei Navalny.

Additionally, General Secretary Xi Jinping is watching and calculating what lessons to draw for his ambitions for Taiwan and beyond. Other U.S. adversaries in Tehran and Pyongyang would also be watching to see how the U.S. and its allies respond. Therefore, the consequences of failure to deter the use of nuclear or chemical weapons must be confronted now.

#### **Putin’s Nuclear Messaging and Threats**

- The Russian leadership weaves nuclear signaling into nearly every aspect of the Ukraine war, from President Putin [personally overseeing a strategic nuclear exercise](#) just before the invasion began, to [Foreign Minister Lavrov’s explicit nuclear threats](#) against the United States and allies, to former [President Medvedev’s nuclear rhetoric](#) concerning the potential NATO membership of Finland and Sweden.

- Coercive nuclear threats against the West are simply another tool in Russia's information warfare toolkit—a cheap and easy way to signal nuclear danger to Western publics, who they expect will then pressure their leaders to avoid standing up to Russia.
- But Russia's military doctrine makes clear nuclear weapons are more than just a tool of information warfare: Putin and Russia's leadership view them as real options in its military toolkit as well.
- Unlike the United States and NATO, which view nuclear weapons as a deterrent, Russia, because of its conventional military inadequacy (which has been amplified for the world to see in Ukraine), views them as military warfighting capabilities and tools of coercion. This is precisely what the world must confront and deter now.
- Unfortunately, Russia's approach seems to be working. Moscow's threats have reportedly deterred the United States from providing certain kinds of weapons to Ukraine. The United States has even been [deterred from certain economic sanctions](#) for fear of provoking an escalatory response from Putin.
- Perhaps most alarming, Putin [continues his nuclear messaging](#), while the United States refrains from conducting even [routine nuclear deterrent sustainment](#) activities.
- The danger now is that Putin concludes that he has successfully deterred the United States and the West and could use these weapons with relatively little risk. Putin could see nuclear or chemical use in Ukraine as a direct warning to NATO countries.

### **Deterrence Messaging Now**

- Given Russia's predilection for nuclear threats, its large and growing stockpile of all types of nuclear weapons (including low-yield, short-range non-strategic nuclear weapons), its use of chemical weapons in attempted assassinations of dissidents and others, and its conventional forces' poor performance, the possibility of a Russian nuclear first use or chemical weapons use in Ukraine is growing.
- To deter Russia, NATO, and specifically the United States, must be prepared to respond to the first wartime use of a nuclear weapon since World War II.
- No option should be taken off the table. Doing so only makes Russia's calculations easier, rather than more difficult. There is power in leaving the type and scale of the U.S. response ambiguous. Unfortunately, the Biden Administration is already doing the opposite and is [telegraphing to Russia](#) what options it will not take in response.
- The Arms Control and Counterproliferation Working Group believes that the Biden Administration should lead the North Atlantic Council to issue a statement by the heads-of-state as soon as possible that makes clear that any Russian nuclear or chemical employment in Ukraine will be considered a military threat to NATO, will trigger the deployment of additional forces to Eastern Europe on a permanent basis, and could

include a conventional kinetic military response against Russian forces in Ukraine and a potential proportional nuclear employment against Russian forces.

- NATO should warn Russia that nuclear weapons use would prompt the Alliance to bolster its nuclear deterrence posture in Europe, redeploy conventional and possibly nuclear-armed intermediate-range missiles, and boost defenses in Europe and elsewhere against Russian missiles, a fear Russia has long held. None of this should come at the expense of other national defense priorities with a well-resourced defense budget, which [Congress is working to deliver](#).
- The United States should also make clear that a nuclear use by Russia would result in a withdrawal from New START—an arms control agreement that Russia desperately wishes to hold on to—and freedom for the U.S. to redeploy, without limit, current non-deployed strategic nuclear weapons in its stockpile.
- The Biden Administration should caution China that Russian nuclear use in Ukraine will have devastating consequences for global nuclear nonproliferation and that new states, including some U.S. allies and partners, could resurrect or begin nuclear weapons programs. The United States should also tell Beijing that it would begin discussions with South Korea, Japan, and Taiwan on possible nuclear deployments/sharing agreements.
- Failing to respond in a significant way, beyond economic punishment, to Russian nuclear employment could have a calamitous impact on non-proliferation and encourage continued Russian nuclear employment. It could also signal to allies and adversaries alike that the U.S. will not intervene militarily if an enemy employs a nuclear weapon.
- Rather than waiting for Russia to employ a nuclear weapon and then having to act, the U.S. must communicate these consequences now in order for deterrence to succeed. This should be foremost among the lessons of the failure of the Biden Administration and the West to deter Russia's war against Ukraine.

#### **Post Chemical Use Will be Difficult to Confirm**

- The likelihood of receiving reliable, verifiable information and evidence following a chemical weapons attack is low. Various chemical weapons could be Russian or could create a plausible deniability of Russian use and be blamed on Ukrainian actors, however implausible.
- Russia's actions in Syria and in the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons highlights that Moscow will use all tools at its disposal to prevent accountability.
- The Biden Administration must prepare for this scenario and counter it, including by rapid release of intelligence reporting along with European partners.
- Nuclear use by Russia, on the other hand, would be far harder to obfuscate: nuclear forensic capability, national technical means, and Russian deterrence goals would all lead

to prompt attribution. Russia would likely seek to take credit for it in order to achieve the effect it would seek of ending the conventional conflict (which it is so obviously losing) and deter the United States and NATO from escalation.

### **Implications for China and Taiwan**

- China is watching the war in Ukraine closely. The Biden Administration's extreme hesitation in confronting Russia before and during the war, and excessive fears of nuclear escalation, have already taught Beijing to rely more heavily on nuclear threats and nuclear weapons in its strategy.
- Xi Jinping likely views his previous direction to grow China's nuclear forces as even more justified in light of Russia's apparent success in wielding nuclear threats. The United States and allies must disabuse Xi of any notions that he can successfully brandish nuclear weapons in a crisis and attack neighbors, like Taiwan, and while deterring U.S. military intervention.
- U.S. allies and partners in the Indo-Pacific are also watching the war in Ukraine closely. The Biden Administration's propensity to be cowed by Russian nuclear threats is already weakening assurance with these allies. They may increasingly doubt the reliability of America's promises to come to their defense in the face of Chinese or North Korean nuclear threats.
- To maintain deterrence and assurance in the Indo-Pacific, the Biden Administration must be prepared to impose overwhelming costs if Moscow uses WMD in Ukraine. Beijing must see unambiguous and unacceptable consequences for Moscow.

### **Conclusion**

In reality, there are no good choices if Putin decides to cross the Rubicon with nuclear or chemical use. All come with costs; all come with risk of further escalation. It is therefore imperative that, in the face of Russian saber-rattling, the United States show commitment to its own nuclear deterrent and willingness to take no option off the table if Russia attacks its vital interests.

Thus far, the Biden Administration has not once reminded Russia of the strength of the U.S. nuclear deterrent and commitment to using nuclear forces if necessary. Indeed, the Administration's recent Nuclear Posture Review demonstrated to America's allies and adversaries that its commitment to the nuclear deterrent—and extended deterrent—is lacking.

Instead, the Biden Administration has focused on messaging actions it will not take—including engaging directly in Ukraine with U.S. military capability. The Administration must stop announcing what it will not do. The Administration must learn from its failure to deter Vladimir Putin in February and re-establish deterrence now before Russian escalation forces the Administration's hand at a much higher cost and greater risk.

### **Recommended Reading**

- Forum for American Leadership, "[Biden's Nuclear Posture Review](#)."

- Rebecca Heinrichs, “[Biden Must Deter Putin from Using Nuclear Weapons.](#)” *National Review*. (4/23/22)
- Anthony Ruggiero & Andrea Stricker, “[Deter Russia’s Use of Chemical Weapons in Ukraine.](#)” *Defense One* (3/24/22)

*This paper is a product of the Forum for American Leadership’s [Arms Control and Counterproliferation](#) Working Group.*

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