ARGUMENT

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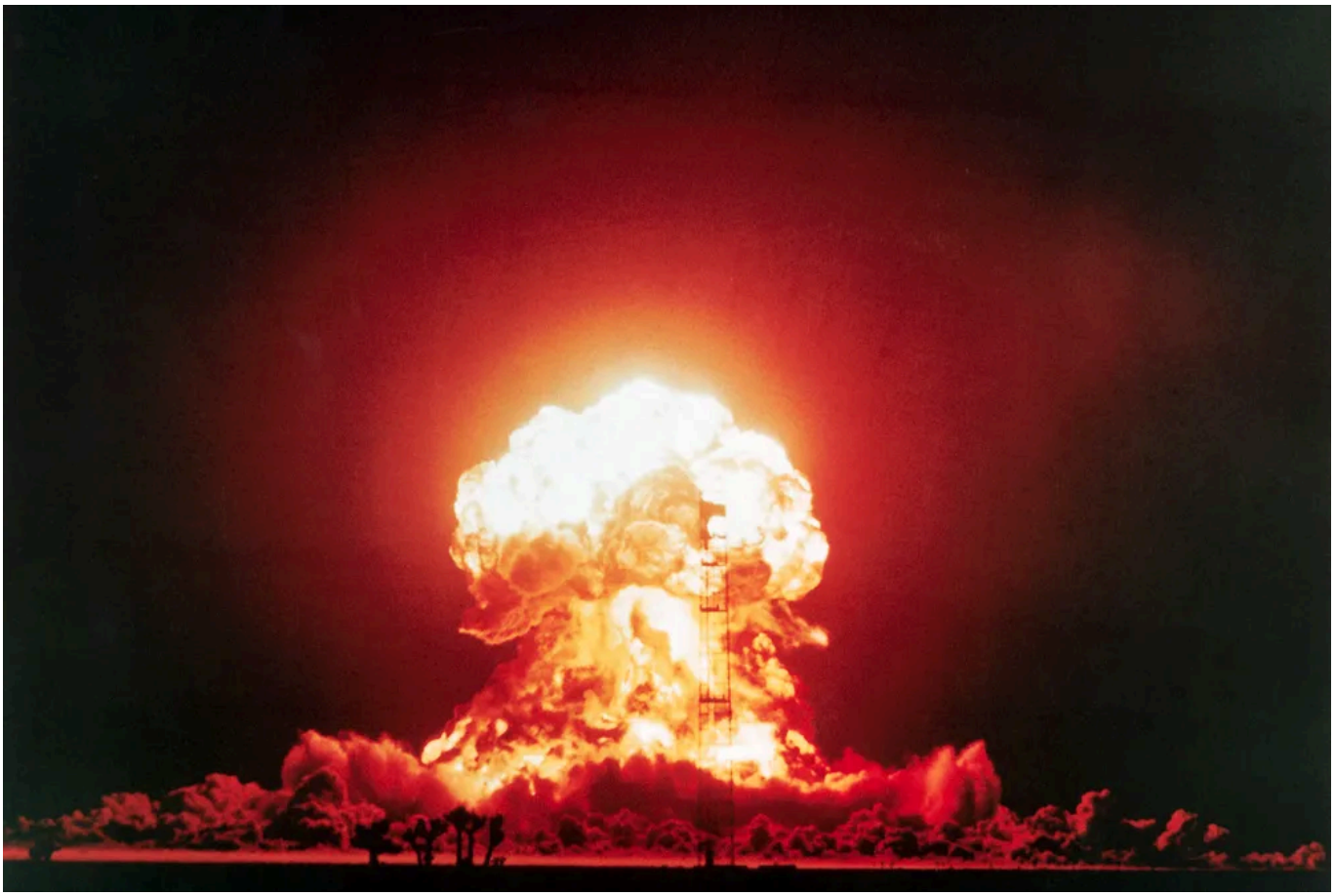
The Changing Nuclear Mind Game

Russia's nuclear threats to reach conventional goals in Ukraine mark a new era of brinkmanship.

By **Rose Gottemoeller**, a lecturer at Stanford University and former NATO deputy secretary-general.



A 23-kiloton nuclear test explosion is seen at the Nevada Test Site near Las Vegas, Nevada, on April 18 1953. CORBIS VIA GETTY IMAGES

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Russian President Vladimir Putin's order for nuclear weapon drills went public on May 6, the day after Orthodox Easter—a bitter irony since he styles himself a fervent guardian of Christian values, which do not include the simulation of nuclear annihilation the last time I checked. I wonder whether he signed the order before or after his much-publicized attendance of Easter service at Moscow's Cathedral of Christ the Savior.

The exercises will simulate "theater," or regional, nuclear attacks, in contrast to "strategic" nuclear exercises simulating war with the United States. These theater exercises will be centered in Russia's southern military district, likely targeting not only Ukraine but also NATO members Romania, Bulgaria, and Turkey. The message coming from Moscow is that the exercises are in answer to loose talk from French President Emmanuel Macron and other NATO leaders about possibly sending alliance forces to fight in Ukraine.

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The Kremlin appears to be reinforcing, in no uncertain terms, a red line against NATO boots on the ground in Ukraine. Fortunately, it is a red line that most NATO leaders share, including U.S. President Joe Biden. From the very outset of Putin's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022,

Biden made it clear that the United States and its allies would send military assistance to Ukraine but not engage in the fighting. His goal was and remains crystal clear: to avoid a direct fight between Russia and NATO in Europe that could escalate to World War III and nuclear conflict.

Putin also wants to avoid a direct fight between Russia and NATO. For him, that means avoiding strikes against NATO territory or reconnaissance aircraft patrolling the airspace over the Black Sea. NATO deliveries are fair game for attack once they arrive on Ukrainian soil, but not while they are still transiting NATO territory.

The United States and Russia thus agree on one thing in this terrible war: They do not want to risk a nuclear holocaust. Why, then, do the Russians keep claiming that the world is facing one?

Part of it is evidently the Kremlin's effort to derive value from this very brinkmanship—a pattern of behavior rarely seen since the 1962 Cuban missile crisis, the last time the world came to the brink of a nuclear exchange. During the Cold War, the United States and Soviet Union fought proxy wars in many places, from Angola to Vietnam, but threats to use their nuclear forces rarely played a role. Neither side used such threats to achieve conventional battlefield goals, the way leading Russian officials have been doing throughout the war in Ukraine.

Instead, Washington and Moscow first built up their strategic arsenals—the long-range nuclear weapons by which they threaten each other directly—sustaining essential parity as they went. So long as neither side built significantly more than the other, and as long as both sustained a high level of readiness, the two superpowers had a nuclear deterrent that both considered stable.

This stability became so boring and reliable that people more or less forgot about nuclear annihilation. Once policymakers in Washington and Moscow began to control and limit their nuclear arsenals in the 1970s—starting with the first U.S.-Soviet détente and the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty—the rest of the world was glad. No one wanted to think about what would happen if the nuclear superpowers "pressed the button." And they did not have to: The superpowers were heading in a different direction, reducing their reliance on nuclear weapons.

The war in Ukraine has thrown this complacency into turmoil, because Putin and his minions have insisted on rattling the nuclear saber throughout the invasion. Now the rest of the world has to think again about nuclear weapons and what Russia might do with them.

This bizarre game of nuclear look-at-me is linked to the Kremlin's equally bizarre complaint that its act of invading Ukraine has created an existential threat to Russia. In this telling, NATO support to Ukraine is tied up with strategic defeat of Russia. As commentators in Moscow claim, Russia only wanted the best for Ukraine—its liberation from a "Nazi" regime and a fake idea of statehood. However, once NATO began to aid Kyiv, the bloc's goal was not helping Ukraine, but destroying and dismembering Russia.

Some leading officials in NATO member states have indeed voiced Russia's strategic defeat as an objective for what they are trying to achieve in assisting Ukraine. But again, Biden has been crystal clear that the bloc has a limited objective that does not threaten Russia itself. In May 2022, he said: "We do not seek a war between NATO and Russia. As much as I disagree with Mr. Putin, and find his actions an outrage, the United States will not try to bring about his ouster in Moscow. So long as the United States or our allies are not attacked, we will not be directly engaged in this conflict, either by sending American troops to fight in Ukraine or by attacking Russian forces."

But Putin and his chief ministers have not been mollified. They continue to go on and on about how the United States and NATO are seeking the strategic defeat of Russia and its demise as a nation. Their motivation is obvious: If its people believe that the country is facing total destruction, they will stay in the fight for the sake of survival.

So there is a lesson here for leaders not only in the United States but also in Europe and Asia: The fabric of nuclear deterrence is changing, its mind game adjusting to a new era of nuclear brinkmanship. So far, Putin and those around him have been the most active practitioners, but North Korea's Kim Jong Un, whose nuclear capacity now extends beyond his regional neighbors, has been not far behind. Beijing, although it has sustained a nuclear good-guy image with a policy of no first use, could be tempted to follow Putin's example as its nuclear force structure becomes more modernized and its ambitions extend throughout Asia.

With so much loose nuclear talk in the air, the United States and its allies must think hard about how to sustain stable and strong deterrence. In other words, they are going to have to focus on how to talk responsibly to the global public about nuclear weapons. The most important audience in deterrence, of course, are the potential nuclear aggressors.

The first rule should be to maintain discipline about using terms such as "strategic defeat," so as not to pander to claims that it is Washington and its allies that are posing an existential threat. If the United States does not seek the destruction of the aggressors' regimes and the dismemberment of their countries, it should say so. If Washington is not clear about the objectives in a conflict, then it should say nothing at all.

The second rule should be to sustain the effectiveness of the U.S. nuclear deterrent and the reliability of its command and control systems. That means consistent, solid support for the ongoing modernization of the nuclear triad. It means continuing nuclear training and exercises in a transparent manner and testing nuclear delivery systems—missiles and bombers. All of these actions should not be articulated in a threatening manner—the United States should not be the one rattling the nuclear saber—but convey quiet confidence in the country's nuclear deterrence forces.

Third, Washington should be pursuing with assurance the mutual predictability that comes from controlling and limiting nuclear weapons at the negotiating table. Of course, Russia, China, and North Korea show little interest in coming to that table today, but the United States should not be the side that is quitting it. The global public wants to see continued progress on nuclear disarmament and nonproliferation, not a descent into a new nuclear arms race. And importantly, the table of nuclear talks is a good place to deliver deterrence messages. As difficult as it may be, the United States and its allies must continue to lead in this arena.

Finally and most importantly, the United States and its allies must sustain steady progress in military assistance to Ukraine. The most serious implication of the delayed funding vote in the U.S. Congress was that the United States could be halted in its tracks by a bully brandishing nuclear weapons. U.S. leaders need to convey quiet confidence in the country's nuclear deterrent and keep their promises to Ukraine. Together, these two elements make up the critical message that must go to others who might try nuclear threats to get their way.

In each of these steps, Washington has great potential to bolster its nuclear deterrent. The United States' naturally open system facilitates communicating deterrence messages when a president speaks to the nation or military and political leaders testify before the U.S. Congress. The national budget process permits the country to convey openly and clearly the process of its nuclear modernization. And working together with allies, the United States can drive nuclear statecraft forward in ways that preserve nuclear predictability and, at the same time, strengthen deterrence. The fabric of nuclear deterrence may be changing, but determining its future must not be left to the aggressors.

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