

Russia's War and the Global Nuclear Order

Russia's war in Ukraine, conducted behind the shield of nuclear deterrence and the threat of escalation, has increased the salience of nuclear weapons worldwide. It endangers the multilateral norms and processes in place to prevent nuclear proliferation and complicates any near-term prospects for disarmament.

By **Névine Schepers**

Russia has carried out its war of aggression in Ukraine under the nuclear shadow from the very beginning. President Vladimir Putin's regular veiled threats have largely served their purpose of reminding the world, and in particular NATO and the United States, that Russia's military action in Ukraine benefits from the deterrent effect of Russia's nuclear forces. This coercive use of nuclear deterrence, sustained through regular signaling, by one of the world's major nuclear powers has a significant impact on the global nuclear order and the future of nuclear non-proliferation, arms control, and disarmament processes.

Many of the multilateral processes in place that shape the global nuclear order depend on the participation and involvement of nuclear weapon states, in particular the United States and Russia – given that they still possess over 90 per cent of the world's nuclear weapons. These processes include arms control treaties, confidence-building measures, the regime built around the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT), nuclear safety and security agreements, and export control mechanisms. While the global nuclear order already faced numerous challenges before the war,¹ prospects for progress are now seriously in doubt given that Russia's participation is often a prerequisite and that the US-Russian Strategic Stability Dialogue is at a complete stop. Cooperation between all nuclear weapon states has always been

difficult, but it presumed a willingness by Moscow to participate in efforts to curb proliferation and prevent unnecessary risks. There is no reason to believe that is still the case for most such processes given Putin's aggressive use of deterrence and intentional manipulation of escalation risks.

The upcoming NPT Review Conference, which is scheduled for August 2022 after several delays due to the coronavirus pandemic, was already slated to be a difficult process. In its war of aggression enabled by nuclear threats, Russia has violated the negative security assurances spelled

Key Points

- ▮ Aggressive nuclear signaling and nuclear risk manipulation enhances the potential for misunderstanding and should not be accepted as a new normal.
- ▮ Increased reliance on nuclear deterrence is unlikely to lead to nuclear proliferation cascades in the near future as long as US security guarantees remain credible to its allies.
- ▮ European publics need to re-learn the dynamics of nuclear deterrence while governments should address nuclear risks without shunning pro-disarmament communities.
- ▮ The nuclear non-proliferation regime will have to adapt to a new phase in which Russia is no longer a responsible actor but actively working against many of its established norms and practices.



A Russian Su-35S combat aircraft and a Tu-95MS strategic bomber fly in formation above a church during a rehearsal for the flypast during the May 9 military parade in Moscow, Russia May 4, 2022. Maxim Shemetov / Reuters

out in the 1994 Budapest Memorandum, which prohibited the threat or use of force against Ukraine's sovereignty and territorial integrity. Moreover, Moscow has also condoned the reckless behavior of its troops around civil nuclear facilities in Ukraine and spread false claims about Kyiv seeking to develop nuclear weapons. All these moves undermine carefully built norms and practices and have negative consequences for a system that is already highly polarized and deadlocked. Avoiding further paralysis of the NPT regime is important in order to ensure that nuclear non-proliferation, safeguards, safety, and security norms can be maintained and, where possible, strengthened. However, this will require addressing Russian actions that go against the treaty and its norms by a broad spectrum of member states, many of which have conflicting interests or do not wish to be overly critical of Russia.

Doubling Down on Deterrence

Russia's war in Ukraine is not the first that has taken place under the nuclear shadow. India and Pakistan, as well as India and China, have had border conflicts in which deterrence played a role. However, Russia's heavy reliance on nuclear deterrence in its full-scale invasion of Ukraine is unprecedented in scope. Nuclear threats have served to establish an upper threshold under which Russia can conduct a conventional war without fear of a military intervention by NATO. Yet, deterrence works both ways: NATO territory remains off-limits to Russia while actions short of direct military intervention such as weapons supply and sanctions remain below the nuclear threshold. Understanding where the threshold lies as the conflict develops and as both sides take further actions becomes harder and more precarious.

Since the start of the war, Putin and his close associates have made regular references to nuclear capabilities,

alternating between raising the alarm through veiled threats and toning down escalatory rhetoric by stating the limited scenarios in which nuclear use would occur.² Nuclear signaling is not new: Putin also referenced nuclear forces during the annexation of Crimea in 2014. However, the high frequency of such messages sets a dangerous new level of normalcy for nuclear messaging. As such, states may feel compelled to take riskier actions to signal escalation. Given the already tense military environment, the potential for misinterpretation increases. European states need to make it clear that such rhetoric remains unacceptable, heightens the risk of misunderstanding, and need not lead to one-upmanship.

The understandable fear that Putin's threats have caused in European public audiences of nuclear war and nuclear accidents has also highlighted the need to

discuss deterrence issues at a wider level, including with policymakers and the broader public. It requires finding the right tone in public debates, where addressing escalation risks is key, but without fueling unwarranted apocalyptic anxieties. In Europe, where some NATO states have steered clear of deterrence issues in the past for fear of popular anti-nuclear responses, re-learning the dynamics of deterrence and engaging on nuclear risk issues without shunning pro-disarmament communities will be important to sustain deterrence policies and cohesion at a transatlantic level.

Non-Proliferation at Stake?

By bringing nuclear weapons back in the international limelight, the war seems to have emphasized the benefits of relying on nuclear deterrence, inciting fears of renewed proliferation. Given that the outcome of the war remains unknown, it is too early to draw conclusions about whether this will encourage more states to develop nuclear programs. However, some preliminary effects are already apparent.

On the one hand, Ukraine's history as a former Soviet Republic that inherited and subsequently returned Soviet nuclear weapons to Moscow in exchange for security assurances gives a different tone to Russia's use of deterrence in this war. The appeal of such negative security assurances has therefore diminished. Within the NPT regime, many non-nuclear weapon states have previously placed particular emphasis on negative security assurances as a means to protect themselves from nuclear conflict. The breaching of such an assurance to Ukraine further undermines efforts to address security gaps posed by the imbalance between nuclear haves and have-nots. More than 100 non-nuclear weapon states rely on negative security assurances included in the protocols to Nuclear-Weapon-Free Zones treaties. If those are no longer deemed credible and

a state feels under existential threat, developing a domestic nuclear deterrent may appear more appealing in the future.

On the other hand, the relevance of positive security guarantees, established through legally binding frameworks such as NATO, has increased, as Sweden and Finland's requests for NATO accession illustrate. This reinforces the perceived value of extended deterrence, meaning the commitment of a nuclear power to deter and respond to attacks in defense of allies. When allies are confident in the credibility of extended deterrence, they refrain from developing their own deterrent.³ However, increased reliance on such security guarantees in Europe adds further weight on the US as the central deterrence provider. While Washington's allies are moving to reinforce conventional deterrence capabilities, the credibility of nuclear deterrence will mostly remain a US responsibility, one that has to withstand future election cycles and potential Trump-like leadership figures.

Nevertheless, despite the appeal of extended deterrence, few additional countries are likely to be able to benefit from new positive security agreements. They would require a willing nuclear weapon state to extend its protection and for that guarantee to be sufficiently credible both to the recipient and to adversary states. Relying on extended deterrence would also be illegal for states parties to the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons (TPNW). For others considering the development of a nuclear program, the prospect of economic sanctions, diplomatic isolation, and even potential military interventions as long as a deterrent is not deemed credible or operational – something that takes time and extensive resources to develop – all remain powerful disincentives.

Paralyzed Nuclear Multilateralism

Russia's actions in the last few months have weakened the grand bargain between nuclear weapon and non-weapon states that is at the heart of the NPT even further. Why should non-nuclear weapon states remain compliant with their non-proliferation obligations under the NPT if a nuclear weapon state such as Russia is intentionally manipulating nuclear risks and using nuclear coercion against the territorial integrity and political existence of another state?

Based on its extensive nuclear capabilities, related infrastructure, and historical leadership, Moscow's constructive participation in multilateral nuclear processes has been essential. Even during past periods of increased tensions, Moscow's commitments to restrict proliferation, minimize certain risks, and maintain certain agreements with the US were not in doubt given that they were for its

own security benefits. In the last several months, Russia has ignored even basic considerations regarding nuclear safety and security after troops shelled civilian nuclear power plants.

Excluding Russia from various dialogue platforms may seem like a way to avoid having these bodies be held hostage to Russian diversion tactics. Diplomats already took part in acts of protest by walking out on Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov's speech at the Conference on Disarmament, where he falsely accused Ukraine of seeking nuclear weapons to threaten Russia. Yet continuously refusing to engage with Russia in multilateral arenas would ultimately be counter-productive given Russia's weight as a nuclear power and its ongoing influence. Several states have abstained from denouncing Russian actions at the UN or from taking part in the multilateral sanctions regime. In particular, China has been cautious not to contradict Moscow's stance.

Instead, the US and European states should continue to factually outline and denounce Russian actions that are in contravention of non-proliferation, safety, and security agreements as well as Russian claims that seek to spread disinformation. Gathering support and input from a broad majority of states is crucial to avoid further polarization of the NPT and other multilateral processes. Carving out space to continue cooperating with Moscow on non-proliferation, as is currently the case on the Iran nuclear negotiations, remains necessary wherever possible.

Disarmament setbacks

Russia's war in Ukraine is unlikely to become a "Cuban Missile Crisis" moment when states come back from the

Further Reading

T. S. Sechser / M. Fuhrmann, *Nuclear Weapons and Coercive Diplomacy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017).

Provides insights into the use of nuclear deterrence for coercive purposes.

Jeffrey W. Knopf, "Why the Ukraine war does not mean more countries should seek nuclear weapons," *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, 12.04.2022.

A short article providing an overview of the limits of nuclear deterrence and an argument for why the war is unlikely to encourage further nuclear proliferation.

Névine Schepers, (2022) "Transatlantic Security and the Future of Nuclear Arms Control," in: Brian G. Carlson / Oliver Thränert (eds.) *Strategic Trends 2022: Key Developments in Global Affairs*, Center for Security Studies (CSS), ETH Zürich: 69–88.

Outlines conflicting nuclear trends in Europe in response to Russia's war in Ukraine and possible risk reduction measures.

verge of nuclear war and are driven to reduce nuclear weapon dangers and arsenals. Instead, nuclear weapon states are more likely to reinvest in deterrence and extended deterrence. While extended deterrence contributes in many ways to non-proliferation objectives, it does not advance disarmament aims. By increasing rather than reducing the salience of nuclear weapons, Russia's war in Ukraine deals a further blow to the NPT regime by pushing back any prospect for progress on a step-by-step multilateral approach to disarmament.

For supporters of the TPNW, the ban treaty therefore appears as the only viable pathway for disarmament and the only political mechanism that highlights the humanitarian consequences of nuclear use and focuses on preventing them. Prior to the war, pro-TPNW activism centered on NATO states, European non-NATO states, and US allies in the Asia-Pacific. This is unlikely to change now, given that a democratic environment is necessary for civil society efforts opposed to government policies to thrive. However, this places undue pressure on democracies with nuclear weapons or those relying on them for their security. It encourages further polarization within the NPT at a time when the NPT needs to remain the cornerstone of the global nuclear order and be strengthened against Russian attempts to weaken it. As a purely normative instrument, the TPNW holds no sway in autocracies like Russia or China. Finally, the TPNW offers no pathway short of complete elimination to address the security needs currently filled by deterrence policies.

As a non-NATO European democracy, Switzerland is under a lot of pressure to sign the TPNW. In 2018, Switzerland already identified several shortcomings of the TPNW.⁴ These notably include the lack of impact a treaty seeking to promote disarmament will have without any participating nuclear weapon states, the security risks such a treaty poses by unevenly targeting democracies, and the prospect of facing restrictions when seeking cooperation with neighboring NATO states. The latter in particular is even more relevant today as Switzerland weighs its options for closer cooperation with NATO. Should those become a priority, TPNW membership would be counterproductive to such objectives.

Outlook

The global nuclear order is entering a phase of high volatility and increasing nuclear risks. An increased reliance on nuclear deterrence – not only by Russia but also by other nuclear powers – may not lead to expected proliferation cascades in the near future as long as US security guarantees remain credible to its allies. However, diminishing disarmament prospects and a loss of credibility of negative security assurances risk polarizing the NPT regime further between nuclear weapon states and states that benefit from their security guarantees on the one hand and non-nuclear weapon states on the other. Russia's shift from a leading state within the global nuclear order to one that actively seeks to undermine its norms and principles will be difficult to manage in a context in which the NPT is already reeling from ongoing crises and a lack of consensus.

An absence of arms control dialogue between the United States and Russia for the foreseeable future also implies there will likely be no successor to the New START treaty by 2026. This would result in reduced transparency and predictability in terms of current strategic arsenals and no pathway for further reductions or addressing other issues affecting strategic stability. With less visibility into decision-making processes or force postures, and little to no dialogue occurring between Russia and the US or between Russia and NATO, transatlantic coordination will remain key in order to manage an increasingly unpredictable security environment through enhanced deterrence.

Selected sources

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2. Susan D'Agostino, "Will Putin go nuclear? A timeline of expert comments", *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, 27.04.2022.
3. Toby Dalton, "Nuclear nonproliferation after the Russia-Ukraine War", *Georgetown Journal of International Affairs*, 08.04.2022.
4. Federal Department of Foreign Affairs (FDFA), *Report of the Working Group to analyse the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons*, 20.06.2018.

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