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## **THE WAR IN UKRAINE: THE FAILURE OF DETERRENCE**

**Abstract:** *With the Russian invasion of Ukraine, it became evident that the longstanding American deterrence policy that had worked during the Cold War failed. In February 2022, Russia started a war of conquest against its neighbor, and the United States and its European allies were unable to prevent it. America’s deterrence broke down for two main reasons. First, successive American Presidents failed to act when Russia used its brute military force against its neighbors. In 2008, Russia attacked Georgia and captured two provinces, proclaiming them “independent states.” In 2014, Russia attacked Ukraine, annexed Crimea, and established military control over two other provinces in Donbas, and announced their “independence.” In both cases, the United States and its European allies imposed mild trade sanctions on Moscow, most of which they soon repealed. The most remarkable act in this regard was sponsored by the Obama administration, which in 2011-2012 pushed hard for Russia’s accession to the World Trade Organization by bullying Georgia not to veto Moscow’s application. The second, more significant cause for the failure of deterrence was America’s refusal to invest in a new generation of strategic weapons. Since the end of the Cold War, the United States has developed very little in terms of upgrading its nuclear arsenal and creating new delivery systems. At the same time, Moscow invested hundreds of billions of dollars in developing and deploying new long-range cruise missiles, new hypersonic missiles, and a new generation of intercontinental ballistic missiles.*

**Keywords:** *Deterrence, war in Ukraine, nuclear weapons, the United States, NATO*

## INTRODUCTION

With the opening shots of the Russian invasion of Ukraine, it became clear that the long-standing American deterrence policy had failed. By February 2022, the United States, with its European allies, failed to deter a large-scale war in Europe: Russia, the largest country in the world, unleashed a war of conquest on Ukraine, the largest country in Europe. As the war was starting, Washington's behavior suggested nothing unusual. Indeed, the White House claimed that Kyiv, Ukraine's capital and the main prize for Moscow's war machine, would fall in three days. The closest allies of Ukraine in Europe, members of NATO, influenced a policy change in Washington as the United States reluctantly engaged in strategic control of Moscow's imperial ambitions. So far, America's strategic control has also failed to convince Russia to stop waging continental-scale warfare that has killed hundreds of thousands of people and displaced millions.

The United States has not only failed to deter a large-scale war in Europe, but the same conflict now threatens to transform into a nuclear catastrophe. Leaders and propagandists of the Russian war efforts have threatened to use nuclear weapons since the very first phases of the Ukraine war. Such threats produced both worry and confusion as the conditions or circumstances of a potential nuclear attack have not been clearly outlined. At the same time, other senior Russian officials have denied that nuclear weapons would be used in the Ukraine war unless some unspecified vital interests of Russia were threatened. By both denying and affirming that the Kremlin is considering attacking its enemies with nuclear weapons, Moscow has both pretended that strategic deterrence is still a viable policy and denied its utility by regularly raising the prospects of nuclear war since the beginning of the Ukraine war. Kremlin officials started talking about nuclear war soon after their anticipated three-day blitzkrieg on Kyiv did not materialize and have not stopped since. By answering both yes and no to the question of whether nuclear deterrence was in place, the Kremlin essentially has affirmed that the Cold War-era deterrence is gone and buried.

The current state of hostility between the United States and Russia is based on their mutual grievances. Under President Putin, the United States has come to see Russia as an aggressive and authoritarian state, suppressing democracy and freedoms at home, while pursuing a foreign policy designed to undermine and even overthrow democracy by attacking, coercing, and otherwise interfering in domestic affairs of other states – including the U.S. with election

interference in the 2016 Presidential election (Report on the Investigation into Russian Interference in the 2016 Presidential Election, United States Department of Justice, March, 2019) – in order to restore its hegemony. Russia’s grievances stem from the feeling that despite the end of the Cold War, by expanding NATO, the U.S. has sought to isolate and contain Russia and humiliatingly consign it to a status incompatible with what it sees as a global power. In sum, Russia has refused to accept the decline of its power following the collapse of the Soviet Union – something Putin characterized in 2005 as “a major geopolitical disaster of the century” (Bigg, 2005) and most recently in 2021 for causing the demise of what he called “historical Russia” (Osborn and Ostroukh, 2021) – and instead has set about restoring Russian power and prestige, putting it into conflict with the United States and the West.

## **1. DETERIORATION OF RUSSO-AMERICAN RELATIONS AFTER THE COLD WAR**

Three events most contributed to the current state of hostility between the United States and Russia. First, NATO’s decision to launch air strikes against Serbia in 1999 during the Kosovo War confirmed Russia’s perception of NATO as a threat. Second, Russia and NATO each interpreted the 2008 Russian-Georgian War very differently. Third, the 2014 Ukrainian Revolution and ensuing civil war in the Donbas region with Russian support for the separatists, along with Russia’s annexation of Crimea, reinforced the mutual perception NATO and Russia both had that they were a threat to the other.

Because Russia has deep ethnic and religious ties with Serbia, NATO air strikes in 1999 against its Orthodox and Slavic allies were seen as aggression and a threat to Russia (Headley, 2009). Because it was not consulted prior to the attacks, Russia saw this as confirmation of NATO’s perception of Russia’s impotence. In response, Russia denounced the attacks as a violation of the United Nations Charter and international law and ended all cooperation and ties with NATO per the 1997 Russia-NATO Founding Act. Russia had supported Serbia in suppressing the rebellion against Kosovar Albanians who sought independence. Given that Russia had just fought the 1994-1996 Chechnya War against Chechnyan secession, it was bound to see its Serbian ally acting in self-defense to preserve its territorial integrity, while NATO and the West saw Serbia as guilty of genocide and war crimes. The end of the Kosovo War witnessed the withdrawal of all Serbian troops and NATO troops entering Kosovo as a peace-keeping force

without seeking Russia's participation. In 2008, Kosovo unilaterally declared its independence, which has been recognized by many states, including the United States and all NATO members, except Spain owing to its own secessionist movement in Catalonia, but not Russia and Serbia. To Russia, NATO's illegitimate and unlawful intervention against Serbia was designed to further dismember and weaken Serbia, one of Russia's few European allies, and would likely serve as a model for future aggression by NATO. The United States and NATO meanwhile saw the 1999 Kosovo War as a humanitarian reaction to war crimes by the Serbian dictatorship of Slobodan Milosevic, who was indicted in March 1999 by the United Nations International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia for war crimes during the Kosovo War and extradited in June to the Netherlands to stand trial but died in 2006 during the trial.

Relations between the United States and Russia continued to deteriorate after the 1999 Kosovo War. Russia saw the 2003 Iraq War as another example of the United States using its military power to ignore and violate international law. That same year, President George W. Bush withdrew from the 1972 Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty in order to develop a missile defense system allegedly against terrorists and rogue states such as Iran and North Korea, but Russia feared that NATO members in Eastern Europe or even the Baltic States might host missile defense systems, undermining Russia's nuclear deterrent threat. During 2003-4, revolutions supported by the United States erupted in Georgia and Ukraine that witnessed pro-Western governments replacing previously more pro-Russian ones, alarming the Kremlin. In the wake of these revolutions being applauded by the United States and the West, talk now began of a third round of NATO expansion with membership for Georgia and Ukraine—which border Russia—but America disregarded Moscow's warnings and continued supporting their membership. Russia now began to see revolutions and the ensuing political changes that had just occurred in Georgia and Ukraine as a way to continue to expand NATO. It also came to regard American and Western efforts to promote democracy in Georgia and Ukraine as plots to not only isolate Russia but also overthrow Russia's government and replace it with a compliant, pro-Western government. In 2007, the U.S. State Department's Annual Human Rights Report criticized the Russian government, claiming the December, 2007 elections for the Duma, Russia's lower house of Parliament, "were not fair," noted the unsolved killings of journalists, and accused Russian security services of engaging in human rights violations to include "...killings, torture, abuse, and violence...." (U.S. State Department, 2007). The report went on to accuse the Russian

government of weakening freedom of expression and media independence, interfering with and harassing foreign non-governmental organizations (NGO), and using its law on extremism to suppress freedom of assembly, speech, and the press (U.S. State Department, 2007). Russia responded by warning the U.S. to not interfere in Russian domestic affairs while cultivating popular support for the government and Russian culture against what it characterized as foreign and hostile threats, continuing to restrict the activities of foreign NGOs, and suppressing all criticism and opposition.

Tensions between NATO and Russia came to a head in August 2008, during the Russian-Georgian War. Following the April 2008 NATO Summit, Russia reiterated its opposition to Georgia and Ukraine joining NATO, seemingly announcing a red-line with Putin declaring that the presence of NATO on Russia's borders was a "direct threat" to Russian security (Danar, 2008; Tsygankov, 2018). Under the pretext of defending the Russian-backed separatists in the breakaway provinces of Abkhazia and South Ossetia who Moscow claimed were being attacked by Georgia, Russia launched a five-day war against Georgia. A ceasefire was agreed on August 12 and on August 26, Russia recognized the independence of these two provinces. Russia's war against Georgia and recognition of both provinces has foreclosed any hope that Georgia would join NATO since all territorial disputes must be resolved in order to be invited to join the organization.

NATO policy markedly changed after the 2014 Ukrainian Revolution by explicitly regarding Russia as a threat to the West. The Wales NATO Summit Communique of September of that same year denounced Russia's "illegal military intervention in Ukraine," its "aggressive" and "illegal and illegitimate annexation of Crimea" and what it called "Russia's pattern of disregard of international law, including the United Nations Charter; its behavior towards Georgia and the Republic of Moldova;...and its use of military and other instruments to coerce neighbors. This threatens the rules-based international order and challenges Euro-Atlantic security" (Clauses 1, 16, and 18). The Alliance went on to blame Russia for what it called "breaking the trust" of cooperation with NATO because it "breached its commitments, as well as violated international law" (ibid, Clause 21). The reference to Moldova refers to the breakaway state of Transnistria and what is seen as Russia's interference there and close ties with this de-facto state. The Summit also called for all member states to raise their defense spending to two

percent of their GDP, twenty percent of which should be on purchasing new equipment. NATO was clearly seeking to increase its military strength. NATO's then-General Secretary Anders Rasmussen identified Russia and the Islamic State as the greatest threats to world peace: "Russia has trampled all the rules and commitments that have kept peace in Europe and beyond since the end of the Cold War. The pattern is clear. From Moldova to Georgia, and now in Ukraine, Russia has used economic pressure and military actions to produce instability. To manufacture conflicts. And to diminish the independence of its neighbors" (NATO, 2014).

After a June 2016 ten-day war game—Anaconda—involving 31,000 troops from 24 NATO countries in Poland, at the NATO Warsaw Summit of July 8-9, 2016, it was announced the rotational deployment of four multi-national battalions of 3,000-5,000 troops between Poland and the Baltic States, and following Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine, at the 2022 Madrid Summit, four more battalions would be deployed to Bulgaria, Hungary, Romania, and Slovakia. Russia denounced Anaconda and argued these deployments violated the 1997 Russia-NATO Founding Act which prohibits "substantial" military forces in Eastern Europe but NATO disagreed (Tsygankov, 2018).

At the 2016 summit, Montenegro was also invited to join the alliance and did so the next year. In the 2016 Warsaw NATO Summit Communique, Russia was again singled out for "its aggressive actions, including provocative military activities on the periphery of NATO territory and its demonstrated willingness to attain political goals by the threat and use of force, are a source of regional instability, fundamentally challenge the Alliance, have damaged Euro-Atlantic security, and threaten our long-standing goal of a Europe whole, free, and at peace" (Clause 5). The communique went on to blame Russia for having "reduced stability and security, increased unpredictability, and changed the security environment...[and] breached the values, principles and commitments which underpin the NATO-Russia relationship..." which has had the effect of breaking the trust of cooperation, and challenging the fundamental principles of the global and Euro-Atlantic security architecture" (Clause 9). Clause 10 identified "Russia's destabilizing actions and policies" to include: "its illegal and illegitimate annexation of Crimea;" "the violation of sovereign borders by force;" "the deliberate destabilization of eastern Ukraine;" "large scale snap [military] exercises..., and provocative military activities near NATO borders, including in the Baltic and Black Seas;" "it is irresponsible and aggressive nuclear rhetoric,

military concept and underlying posture; and its repeated violations of NATO Allied airspace.” Russia’s military intervention in Syria and its support for that government and its use of its military presence in the Black Seas to project power into the Eastern Mediterranean were also criticized as posing “further risks and challenges for the security of Allies and others.”

The 2022 Madrid Summit was notable for NATO updating its Strategic Concept from 2010 by declaring that Russia was “the most significant and direct threat to Allies' security and to peace and stability in the Euro-Atlantic area” by establishing spheres of influence and direct control “through coercion, subversion, aggression and annexation” (Clause 8). It was also announced at the summit that Finland and Sweden would be joining the alliance, a direct result of Russia’s aggression in Ukraine.

The 2023 Vilnius NATO Summit was notable for Finland becoming the newest (thirty-first) member, the attendance of Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky, and the heads of state of Australia, Japan, New Zealand, and South Korea, all of whom seek stronger ties with NATO due to Russia’s aggression and China’s hegemonic ambitions in Asia. The summit communique announced: “Peace in the Euro-Atlantic area has been shattered. The Russian Federation has violated the norms and principles that contributed to a stable and predictable European security order...[and] is the most significant and direct threat to Allies’ security and to peace and stability in the Euro-Atlantic area” (Clause 5). It went on to declare that “We do not and will never recognize Russia’s illegal and illegitimate annexations, including Crimea. There can be no impunity for Russian war crimes and other atrocities, such as attacks against civilians and the destruction of civilian infrastructure that deprives millions of Ukrainians of basic human services. All those responsible must be held accountable for violations and abuses of human rights and international humanitarian law, particularly against Ukraine’s civilian population, including the forced deportation of children and conflict-related sexual violence” (Clause 11). The communique went on to demand that Russia “...immediately stop this illegal war of aggression...and unconditionally withdraw all of its forces and equipment from the territory of Ukraine...” (Clause 8).

## 2. THE FAILURE OF DETERRENCE

American deterrence of Russia most spectacularly failed in terms of the 2022 War in Ukraine: the third time Russia has attacked another state and the second time it has waged war against Ukraine. Deterrence failed because U.S. foreign policy under five different Presidents – Bill Clinton, George W. Bush, Barack Obama, Donald Trump, and Joe Biden – ignored or failed to understand Putin’s grievances and his ambitions to correct these grievances. No clear vision has ever been proposed by any of these Presidents, although Biden and NATO have since committed themselves to defending Ukraine against Russian aggression with extensive military aid in the hope of either securing Ukraine’s military victory or causing Russia to sue for peace. Thus far, the war appears to have become a stalemate, although Ukraine has shown unexpected resilience while Russia’s military has proven surprisingly incompetent.

As it became clear in the mid-1990s that Russia would not become a free market, democratic state, Clinton seemed to lose interest in Russia. Whatever disappointments Clinton had with Russia, President Boris Yeltsin was seen as the only and least-worst option, so there was understandably no desire to turn a reasonably friendly, although corrupt and often publicly drunk Yeltsin into an enemy of the United States and the West. Upon first meeting Putin in 2001, Bush famously said he had been able to “get a sense of his soul,” perhaps reflecting his naivety when it came to international relations (C-SPAN, 2001). In any case, the War on Terror following the attacks of September 11, 2001, and the Wars in Afghanistan and Iraq consumed much of Bush’s Presidency and although cooperation occurred over the threat of international terrorism to both states, this was not enough to bridge growing differences. President Obama was elected in 2008 during an economic crisis that caused a two-year recession and on a promise of ending the unpopular Iraq War while also seeking but failing to find some solution to the stalemated Afghanistan War. He succeeded in withdrawing all U.S. forces from Iraq in 2011 only to be confronted with the rise of the Islamic State in Iraq, compelling him in 2014 to again get involved in Iraq. Unable to forge good relations with Putin early in his Presidency, he seemed to lose interest, while Putin never seemed to respect Obama (Greenblatt, 2013). U.S. support for major protests in Russia against Putin’s decision to seek a third term in 2012 and the increasingly authoritarian nature of Putin’s Russia witnessed a precipitous decline in relations, made worse by Russia’s 2015 intervention in the Syrian Civil War on behalf of its ally dictator Bashar Assad,



and Russia's interference in the 2016 American Presidential election to harm the Presidential campaign of former Secretary of State and Putin critic Hillary Clinton and boost the campaign of Donald Trump. Trump was elected President in 2016 with a seeming disdain for international relations, and international organizations, including NATO and America's European allies, but despite very favorable views expressed about Putin, relations did not improve either, perhaps because Putin saw Trump as unpredictable and not likely to implement a foreign policy that would be friendly or favorable to Russia.

Successful deterrence policy is premised upon several factors, including clarity of the message; credibility of the threat; and capabilities: the existence of sufficient military power (Frieden, Lake, and Schultz, 2021, Mazaar, 2018, Nau, 2021, Mingst and McKibben, 2021, Schelling, 2020). Until Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine, America's responses to earlier threats by Putin and acts of aggression were reactive, which may have only emboldened Putin. Meanwhile, despite repeated objections and warnings by Russia for more than a decade about NATO expansion, American credibility of its deterrent threats was largely non-existent because no such clear threats were ever made. It could be argued that Putin knew this and recognized that the U.S. and NATO would not go to war with Russia over its aggression in Georgia and Ukraine, encouraging him to militarily resist further efforts at NATO expansion. Finally, although the U.S. and NATO boast significant military power – arguably greater than Russia – neither was willing to risk going to war with Russia over Georgia and Ukraine, especially given the fact that Russia remains a nuclear power. In sum, without discounting the merits of promoting NATO expansion, the U.S. seemed unprepared or unwilling to deal with Russia under Putin who was no longer willing to acquiesce to America but instead sought to challenge it to restore Russian power and prestige. The U.S. may have falsely assumed or misperceived that its repeated assurances to Russia that NATO expansion did not pose a threat to it would be credibly received by Putin, but instead, he drew the opposite conclusion – and said so repeatedly publicly – and in response sought to reassert Russia's hegemony, which America saw as a threat to European stability and peace (Tsygankov, 2018). In sum, the state of relations between the U.S. and Russia is a classic example in international relations of the security dilemma, whereby the actions of one state are seen as a threat to the other, causing that state to respond, which then causes the first state to respond in kind, inaugurating an era of rivalry and even crisis, possibly escalating into war. Because the U.S. and Russia both possess nuclear weapons, this probably explains why no

war has occurred between them, although concern exists that tactical nukes might be used by Russia in Ukraine, and yet it seems unlikely the U.S. would respond in kind, or that NATO would invade Ukraine and engage in war with Russia. Although there is always the danger of misperception in international relations (Jervis, 1968, 2017), Putin recognizes the folly of waging a war against NATO, especially since the Ukraine War has only further united NATO, and caused Finland and in the future Sweden to become new members. Finally, although the poor performance of the Russian military in Ukraine may also have given Putin further reason to reevaluate confronting the U.S. and NATO, this may ironically, however, instead make him willing to take more risk precisely because of feelings of desperation and insecurity.

More than anything, Moscow's alleged intention to wrap up the war in Ukraine in three days testified to the utter incompetence of those who planned the invasion. The same claim voiced in Washington; however, evidenced America's inability to deter Moscow in any credible way (Heinrich, Sabes, 2022). That and threatening the Russian war machine with "crippling" and "severe" economic sanctions essentially was an admission that deterrence was not working (The White House, 2022). Once it became clear that deterrence was failing, opinion-makers in Washington could not come up with anything more than repeating a Russian propaganda message that Kyiv would fall within days (Lonas, 2022). Washington offered President Zelensky help with evacuation, which he wisely declined, famously suggesting that he needed weapons to fight, not a ride out of town (Braithwaite, 2022). The belief that Kyiv would fall within days betrayed not only policy failure but also a significant lack of knowledge of basic military history.

This year, 2023, marks the 80th anniversary of the Warsaw ghetto uprising. On April 19, 1943, Nazi German troops entered the Warsaw ghetto to deport its inhabitants to the extermination camps. About 700 young Jewish fighters offered armed resistance to the German army. The Jewish insurgents were not professional soldiers; they were poorly armed and only supported by the Polish underground (Gutman, 1998). Germans used heavy guns and tanks, the Luftwaffe bombed the ghetto, but the insurgents managed to fight for almost a month in an area of about 1.3 square miles (Kurzman, 1993). In comparison, Kyiv, before the Russian invasion, was a city of about 3 million people occupying an area of 324 square miles, about 30% larger than Chicago. Surrounded by forests and satellite towns, in February 2022, Kyiv was defended by more than 20 thousand professional soldiers aided by tens of thousands of territorial defense

troops, elite security units, the city police, armed citizens, and experienced foreign volunteer fighters (Bezpalko, 2023). Those who expected the Ukrainian capital to fall within days also underestimated the ingenuity and creativity of its defenders (Judah, 2022). The defenders of Kyiv knew that they faced an enemy no less determined and cruel than members of the Wehrmacht attacking the Warsaw ghetto in 1943. The fact that official Washington voiced the conviction that Ukraine would lose the city in three days was a signal to Moscow that the White House was ready to disengage, forget Eastern Europe, and let the Russians have their way.

The failure of deterrence; however, is not entirely the Biden administration's fault. In fact, President Biden and his people have given more credibility to deterring Russia than the previous four American presidents (Liptak, Atwood, 2021). The Biden administration has also done better in arresting the Kremlin's appetite for a new conquest. But the change in Washington's Russia policy was at least partly forced by America's European allies, specifically by the United Kingdom and Poland. Boris Johnson, the UK Prime Minister, led the weapons deliveries to Ukraine when the White House was advising President Zelensky to evacuate Kyiv (Piper, Macaskill, Tsoleva, 2022). The Polish government made it clear that Poland would assist Ukraine in the war effort with or without NATO support. Warsaw sees a free and independent Ukraine as a pivotal component of its national security (Bluth, 2023).

America's deterrence broke down for two main reasons. First, successive American Presidents failed to act decisively when Russia used its brute military force against its neighbors. In 2008, Russia attacked Georgia and captured two provinces, proclaiming them to be "independent states." In 2014, Russia attacked Ukraine, annexed Crimea, and established military control over two other provinces in Donbas, and announced their "independence." In both cases, the United States and its European allies imposed mild trade sanctions on Moscow, most of which they soon repealed. The most remarkable act in this regard was sponsored by the Obama administration, which in 2011-2012 pushed hard for Russia's accession to the World Trade Organization by bullying Georgia not to veto Moscow's application (Bosco, 2011).

The second, perhaps more significant cause for the failure of deterrence was America's refusal to invest in a new generation of strategic weapons. Since the end of the Cold War, the United States has developed very little in terms of upgrading its nuclear arsenal and creating new delivery systems (Hennigan, 2022). In the 1990s, AGM-158 was a noteworthy addition to

America's strategic arsenal. There are a handful of other projects under development, but their completion is still years away (Gordon, 2023). At the same time, Moscow invested billions of dollars in developing and deploying new generation cruise missiles, such as *Kalibr* and *Klub*, new hypersonic missiles *Kinzhal* and *Tsirkon*, and a new intercontinental ballistic missile *Sarmat* (Kotlyar, 2023). Early in his now more than two-decade-long tenure, President Putin authorized the upgrade to the *Topol-M* mobile intercontinental ballistic missile and ordered their increased production. More recently, Russia made progress in developing a nuclear-powered cruise missile, *Burevestnik*, with an unlimited range (Eckel, 2023).

It may be true that these new additions to Russia's nuclear arsenal only marginally tip the strategic balance in Moscow's favor. America's old missiles work fine, and theoretically, they should be able to deter Russia. However, that is not how Russia views the strategic scales. On many occasions, Putin has bragged that he believes Russia now has a significant advantage in strategic arms. This mistaken view emboldens Russian leadership to threaten NATO with nuclear strikes. Moscow also tries to drag its neighbors into this nuclear poker game with the West. In this regard, the Kremlin has had much success with Belarus but not with China, and it is still courting North Korea.

### **3. NUCLEAR WEAPONS IN BELARUS**

In the summer of 2023, Russia deployed its "tactical" nuclear weapons to Belarus, to the apparent delight of the President of Belarus (Kelly, Osborn, 2023). Realistically, no one in Belarus should be happy with this ominous development – stationing the so-called tactical nuclear weapons in Belarus increases the likelihood of their use, specifically against targets on the European continent. The deterrence strategy assumes the possibility of a limited nuclear war (Waltz, 2009). That is; theoretically, the nuclear superpowers should be able to wage war against each other with only a limited number of nuclear strikes. Historically, it has been difficult to devise a scenario in which such a limited nuclear conflict does not transform into an all-out global nuclear war with hundreds of millions and even billions of people killed and injured (Freedman, 2004). Moscow's deployment of its nuclear weapons to Belarus makes a limited nuclear war scenario more realistic, with Belarus acting as Russia's nuclear shield.

Even though they are frequently confused in public commentaries, tactical nuclear weapons are not the same as battlefield nuclear weapons. In fact, when it comes to combat between ground forces, there is no such thing as “battlefield nuclear weapons” unless one uses the word “battlefield” very loosely by imagining whole countries or continents as battlefields. Heavily mechanized infantry battalions, regiments, or brigades wage combat to gain a handful of kilometers of the enemy territory. For example, in the current battles in Ukraine, a breakthrough can be achieved if one side gains 5 kilometers (more than 3 miles) advance through the enemy’s defensive lines. To use nuclear weapons within such short distances will be simply suicidal. Nuclear weapons can be used in a conventional war theater to disrupt enemy supply lines, destroy heavy concentrations of enemy manpower, destroy large strategic bridges, dams, etc. Still, such targets should not be within 50 kilometers (about 31 miles) of their own troops, and no contemporary ground battles have that much separation.

Certain classes of nuclear weapon delivery systems are historically identified as “tactical” primarily because they were not included in the Soviet-American strategic arms reduction treaties. These treaties were first negotiated more than 50 years ago, and subsequently, several were successfully concluded between the United States and the Soviet Union and then between the U.S.A. and the Russian Federation, the main successor state of the U.S.S.R.

The successful strategic arms reduction treaty negotiations and the avoidance of a nuclear conflict during the Cold War demonstrated, at least to the faithful, that deterrence worked (Buteux, 1983). However, a couple of important things have changed in more than five decades since the conclusion of the first such treaties. For one, the yield of the nuclear explosion that smaller size warheads can produce has increased significantly. Also, the range and speed of cruise missiles have also increased, while their guidance and targeting systems have improved most dramatically. All these make the task of tracking such missiles nearly impossible and their interception very difficult. The range of the *Kalibr* missile is about 2,500 kilometers (1,550 miles), more than 500 miles more than the range of the *Tomahawk* missile. It is rumored that the Russians are working to increase the *Kalibr* range to more than 4,000 kilometers. This distance is the reach of the intermediate-range ballistic missiles – once a major subject of strategic arms reduction negotiations. If the Russians successfully develop and deploy the unlimited-range

*Burevestnik* cruise missile, the Russian Federation will have a significant advantage in strategic arms.

If Moscow were to decide to launch a nuclear strike against a target or a handful of targets in Europe, it could do so from Belarus. If conducted with a cruise missile, such a launch can be detected, but their flight path cannot be tracked. Where these missiles are headed and what sort of warheads they carry will become known when they detonate. If such strikes are conducted with military drones, neither their flightpaths can be tracked, nor can their launch be detected. Suppose such covert Russian attacks reach their targets somewhere in Europe and wreak mass destruction. In that case, it will be up to the United States to retaliate, and this retaliation must be symmetrical to avoid further escalation. The Kremlin will blame the Belarus leadership, and the latter may unwittingly claim their role. Assigning the blame to Belarus would also be acceptable to NATO, because it would make it easier to retaliate symmetrically against Belarus than against Russia itself. A tragic development of this sort would produce hundreds of thousands of casualties but solve nothing in the Ukraine war or the long-term Russia-NATO power balance. Therefore, rational minds would argue that such a scenario is unlikely, but again, the decision-makers in this case, are those who expected Kyiv and Ukraine to fall in three days.

#### **4. CONCLUSION**

One of the reasons deterrence proved effective during the Cold War was the relatively recent memory of the American nuclear bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki at the end of World War II (Clark, 1985). However, since the Cold War's conclusion, the United States, along with its NATO allies, has not given due attention to the concept of nuclear deterrence. Washington's failure lay in its strategy of employing deterrence at a suboptimal level. Very little deterrence is not only ineffectual but also more perilous than having no deterrence at all (Freedman, 2004). In the case of Russia, Washington's lukewarm approach inadvertently emboldened the Kremlin.

Insufficient investment in nuclear weaponry, strained transatlantic relations, attempts to reset relations with Russia on Moscow's terms (Reuter, 2009), and discussions of America's potential withdrawal from NATO (Trump, 2018), among other policies, have collectively contributed to a misguided sense of confidence among Russian decision-makers. The United

States' reluctance to provide arms to Ukraine (prior to the beginning of the current war) and its reluctance to assist other nations frequently threatened by Russia further solidified the Kremlin's perception that Washington was all talk and no action. Historical precedent has shown that displays of weakness and confusion have never successfully deterred Russia's leaders. To enhance its posture, Washington would be wise to reevaluate the lessons of recent history and rectify its more recent mistakes.

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