

IS THE UTILISATION OF TACTICAL NUCLEAR WEAPONS A 'REAL THREAT'?

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A recent article published by the Financial Times[1] has brought tactical nuclear weapons (TNWs) again to the fore. The British newspaper has received documents which report the design of some exercises held by the Russian military, in which the utilization of TNWs was triggered by situations less extreme than those outlined in public documents. This means that Moscow may decide to launch a nuclear strike even if its existence is not threatened.

Since the start of the Russian invasion of Ukraine, TNWs have been mentioned several times. In particular, the utilization of such weapons by Moscow against Kyiv or NATO allies in case of intervention has been depicted as a credible scenario.

Russian officials themselves have adopted an aggressive rhetoric at different stages of the conflict, strengthening the perception in numerous western commentators that Russia is actually willing to carry out a nuclear strike - and that in some cases it was even close to do so. The most notable example is the reiterated threats issued by President Vladimir Putin at the beginning of the invasion, when he referred to "those [countries] who may be tempted to interfere"[2] saying that "the consequences will be such as [they] have never seen in [their] entire history"[3]. The Kremlin has gained western media's attention again in the last weeks, as President Putin and Spokesperson Dmitri Peskov have blamed the West for a dangerous behavior that has the potential to trigger a nuclear war[4].

The scenario outlined in abovementioned documents compounds the image of Russia as an aggressive State, ready to use massive force, even in a first-strike fashion, to achieve quickly its objectives. TNWs make this perceived aura more credible, thanks to their alleged nature. Being tactical, their destructive power is expected to provoke a lighter impact on the battlefield than the bigger, strategic ones.

A strike with TNWs may then be considered more acceptable by the international community and public opinion, as the smaller impact would prevent a nuclear apocalypse. Therefore, the attack may serve a double purpose - to get a quick victory and to avoid retaliatory measures at the diplomatic level and a military response by the potential supporters of the targeted enemy, affected by the fear of a nuclear attack on their soil.

In an era of renewed competition, in which the use of force seems to be again considered as an optimal means for the achievement of foreign policy objectives, TNWs have the potential to become a much-debated option. The presumed benefits of their utilization may induce the States which possess them to lower the threshold to trigger a nuclear strike and those which does not to start programs to build them. However, an analysis of these weapons presents a more complex reality, in which TNWs are related to an intricate set of costs and benefits that makes the latter outweigh the former only in rare, extreme scenarios.

This paper analyzes the Russo-Ukrainian conflict and the features of tactical nuclear weapons to show that a nuclear first-strike even with such less destructive weapons is unlikely. By doing so, it detects a set of causes of this unlikelihood that can be abstracted and used as an assessment tool also for new, potential conflicts and crises that involve countries which possess nuclear weapons.

[1] M. Seddon and C. Cook, Leaked Russian military files reveal criteria for nuclear strike, Financial Times, 28 February, 2024, <https://www.ft.com/content/f18e6e1f-5c3d-4554-ae5-50a730b306b7>

[2] <https://nuclearrussiaukraine.csis.org/#top>

[3] Ibid.

[4] Institute for the Study of War, Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, March 6, 2024, <https://www.understandingwar.org/backgrounder/russian-offensive-campaign-assessment-march-6-2024>; B. Aris, Putin warns Nato of risk of nuclear war, tries to rally the population in his State of the Nation speech, bne Intellinews, 29 February, 2024, <https://www.intellinews.com/putin-warns-nato-of-risk-of-nuclear-war-tries-to-rally-the-population-in-his-state-of-the-nation-speech-314783/?source=russia>

The case of the Russo-Ukrainian war.

The utilization of tactical nuclear weapons (TNW) in the Russo-Ukrainian conflict is being perceived as a concrete option for Moscow to gain a decisive advantage on the battlefield and defeat Kyiv. Being Ukraine a member of no military alliance, it makes more difficult for NATO and the broader political western community to decide whether to intervene and respond – and in case, how. Retaliation could spark an escalation that may bring to an all-out nuclear war between Russia and the Atlantic Alliance; consequently, Russia is seen in a favorable position, from which it can decide to conduct a nuclear strike and possibly not receive any punishment in military terms. The whole scenario is so realistic that US President Joe Biden has declared that the utilization of TNWs by Russia is a “real threat”[5].

Two elements contribute to make the utilization of nuclear weapons a realistic, credible occurrence. First, the rhetoric of the Russian leadership, that has been trying to convey the message that there is a real willingness to use these weapons from the start of the conflict. Russian President Vladimir Putin, Deputy Chairman of Russian Security Council Medvedev, the Chechen leader Kadyrov are among the most prominent figures of Moscow's establishment that has signaled the intention to carry out a nuclear strike if necessary[6], supported also by state-owned media. Practical measures have coupled rhetoric, such as the President-ordered “special mode of combat duty” of the nuclear forces[7].

The aggressive posture of Russia has conveyed a picture of a State that is ready to break a taboo, if considered necessary. Rhetoric strengthens doctrine's credibility, the second element of the equation. In addition to the somewhat vague threshold for the decision to launch a nuclear strike, in terms of deterrence, the strategic community has developed the “escalate-to-de escalate” concept[8], referring to a potential decision by Russia to launch a nuclear strike in a localized conflict with the purpose to put it to an end and restrain a potential country or alliance intervention to support the enemy. In such a scenario, TNWs play a significant role, given their minor destructive power.

These elements are nourishing fears that are inherent in a conflict in which a nuclear power is involved. The unpredictability of war and the nuclear option for either warring party combine to raise the risk of massive destruction, with the consequence of putting a heavy burden on policy makers about how to respond. In this case, the western community has had to gauge thoroughly the way to support Ukraine.

[5] T. Hunnicutt and N. Bose, Biden says threat of Putin using tactical nuclear weapons is 'real', Reuters, June 20, 2023, [https://www.reuters.com/world/biden-says-threat-putin-using-tactical-nuclear-weapons-is-real-2023-06-20/#:~:text=June%2019%20\(Reuters\)%20%2D%20President,of%20such%20weapons%20in%20Belarus](https://www.reuters.com/world/biden-says-threat-putin-using-tactical-nuclear-weapons-is-real-2023-06-20/#:~:text=June%2019%20(Reuters)%20%2D%20President,of%20such%20weapons%20in%20Belarus).

[6] V. Folkman, Nuclear weapons on the table if Ukraine counteroffensive succeeds: Russia's Medvedev, Politico, July 30, 2023, <https://www.politico.eu/article/russia-dmitry-medvedev-ukraine-counteroffensive-russia-invasion-war-nuclear-weapons/>; J. Dettmer, Risk of nuclear escalation is still too large for comfort, Politico, July 10, 2023, <https://www.politico.eu/article/risk-nuclear-escalation-large-cuban-missile-crisis-russia-ukraine-war/>; F. Light, Kadyrov says Russia should use low-yield nuclear weapon, Reuters, October 1, 2022, <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/russia-says-its-troops-left-lyman-avoid-encirclement-2022-10-01/>.

[7] M. Luxmoore, Putin Puts Nuclear Forces in a 'Special Mode of Combat Duty', Wall Street Journal, February 27, 2022, <https://www.wsj.com/livecoverage/russia-ukraine-latest-news-2022-02-26/card/putin-puts-nuclear-forces-in-a-special-mode-of-combat-duty--WKMRkTauWFNnWy26hZar>.

[8] C. Salloum, Ukraine and nuclear weapons, in T. Tardy (ed.), War in Europe, NATO Defense College, 2022, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep41406.10>.

The risk to trigger a nuclear exchange with Russia has influenced the progressive steps to provide military equipment to Kyiv; along with strategic calculation, a significant part of public opinion is skeptical – when not overtly against – of the posture adopted by the EU and NATO[9], scared of the consequences that an accident or a bold move by the parties involved may cause.

Interestingly, chance, unilateral declarations, and hypothetical doctrinal guidelines have been the aspects mainly mentioned in publications and articles so far. If these are obviously important elements to be considered, it is also true that focusing exclusively on them provides a restricted view of a more complex issue. Some other aspects can expand the frame and provide tools to assess how likely it is that Russia will use TNWs to win the war in Ukraine. In particular, these are the Russian strategic thought, the essence of TNWs, and the political aspects of the conflict against Ukraine itself.

[9] European Parliament, Public Opinion on Russia's War against Ukraine, June 15, 2023, <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/at-your-service/files/be-heard/eurobarometer/2022/public-opinion-on-the-war-in-ukraine/en-public-opinion-on-the-war-against-Ukraine-20230615.pdf>; D. Smeltz and L. El Baz, American Public Support for Assistance to Ukraine Has Waned, But Still Considerable, The Chicago Council on Global Affairs, October 4, 2023, <https://globalaffairs.org/research/public-opinion-survey/american-public-support-assistance-ukraine-has-waned-still#:~:text=As%20a%20whole%2C%20a%20slim,say%20it%20has%20not%20been>.

The Russian way of war: the decisive role of the informational domain.

Understanding the Russian approach to war is fundamental to understand the rhetoric that Moscow has been using in the conflict against Kyiv. The frequent reference to the possibility of the utilization of nuclear weapons is the reflection of a *modus operandi* that Russia has adopted for more than a decade. The perceived inferiority of its conventional arsenal and the sense of encirclement caused by NATO have generated a fear for the survival of the country as a great power. The emphasis on nuclear weapons is the reflection of this fear, or better the response to maintain competitiveness in the international arena and retain – or better, reestablish – a sphere of influence.

Nevertheless, to focus exclusively on nuclear weapons conceived as tools for deterrence would lead to a misconception of their role. Nuclear weapons are an instrument to revert the distribution of power, currently favoring the West; but given their destructive power, an actual utilization would make costs outweigh benefits in most of cases. Therefore, they are conceived as a part of a wider strategy of coercion, where informational dominance is the crucial condition to achieve the objectives that Russia sets[10].

Although no specific doctrine has been developed, the vast Russian literature on the subject converges on a set of measures that aim to shape the perception of the enemy on the conditions of the theater of operations and the options available for him to respond. Cognitive-psychological operations are a substantial part of an effort which should make Russia achieve its objectives through non-kinetic means – meaning that large-scale employment of brute force is a sort of element of last resort – and nuclear blackmail is a tool for such operations.

[10] D. Adamsky, Cross-Domain Coercion: The Current Russian Art of Strategy, Proliferation Papers, No.54, November 2015.

The aggressive rhetoric employed by the Russian leadership in the ongoing conflict is the implementation of the framework devised through multiple studies. By reiterating the possibility of using nuclear weapons both against Kyiv and the NATO countries, Moscow has tried to prevent the western community to provide military support to Ukraine[11].

It may be inferred that public opinion was the main target of the threats, given its influence on relevant issues over decision makers. Western mass media have been the optimal vector for conveying the sense of responsibility of NATO in case of a nuclear strike, thanks to articles reporting each declaration issued by the leadership and some opinion makers building predictions on those. An enormous pressure has been placed on western leaders, that still are in a condition of being forced to assess carefully whether to insert new, more effective systems in the military aid rounds in order to prevent an escalation by Moscow.

The long-awaited, progressive provision of tanks, heavy artillery, and missile systems is the reflection of the relative effectiveness of Russia's coercive strategy.

At the same time, the fact that the abovementioned equipment is at the disposal of Ukraine exposes cracks in the facade. The infringement of the "ban" imposed by Moscow has not provoked any escalation nor punishment against the western community. The gap between words and deeds has been highlighted and pointed as a signal of lacking resolve about the launch of a nuclear strike on the part of Russia[12].

The reduced frequency of threatening statements is another hint on the actual will of employing nuclear weapons on Ukrainian soil. Giles[13] has noted that there are scenarios that may induce such a decision, but the hypotheses are proven wrong by a set of circumstances that make him argue that President Putin may seriously consider a nuclear strike if he runs out of the vast range of alternative options at his disposal. But even if this scenario materialized, other aspects would point against the decision to carry out such a strike.

[11] J. Laivikanen, Nuclear Deterrence in the Ukraine War: Diplomacy of Violence, FIA Briefing Paper, February 2023.

[12] A. Baklitskiy, What We Learned From Recent Calls for a Russian Nuclear Attack, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, July 20, 2023, <https://carnegieendowment.org/politika/90232>.

[13] Giles, K. (2023), Russian nuclear intimidation: How Russia uses nuclear threats to shape Western responses to aggression, Research Paper, London: Royal Institute of International Affairs, <https://doi.org/10.55317/9781784135645>.

Tactical nuclear weapons: inherent contradictions.

In a provocative fashion, it may be said that it is not possible to decide to use TNWs, simply because no weapon can be defined as such a priori. Many attempts to find an unequivocal definition have been conducted, but all have failed – it has been acknowledged that both strategic and nonstrategic weapons can have same features that make them undistinguishable. The consensus that has been reached is that it is the effect of the strike that defines their nature[14]. But this implies that it is not possible for adversaries to understand the intentions of the State that is going to launch a strike before it has been actually delivered. Russia makes no exception; the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) identifies TNWs as “a class of nuclear weapons designed to engage objects [...] with the purpose of accomplishing a tactical mission”[15] – it is not possible for Moscow to detect a specific class of nuclear weapons definable as tactical either.

Two problems arise from the hybrid nature of TNWs: first, that a launch cannot be distinguished by adversaries, that may respond with whatever nuclear weapon, triggering a spiral of misinterpretations that could lead to a full-scale nuclear war; second, again provocatively, that the launch may have an unintendedly larger effect, closer to strategic than tactical – chance is always a variable to take into account, and no TNW has ever been used, then it is not possible to have an extremely accurate assessment of its impact. Tactical nuclear weapons do not exist as specific assets with specific features and well-defined impacts, making their utilization difficult to plan for the party willing to launch them.

The issue of the impact – i.e. the destructive effect – of TNWs has been debated, and there are large doubts about a restricted damage over the operational theatre in the case of a strike with such weapons. The perception shared by some scholars is that there would be no substantial difference with respect to a strike conducted with strategic weapons[16].

In the midst of the Cold War, Phyllip Dyer[17]noted that simulations of employment of TNWs in NATO exercise Operation Carte Blanche had proved that they would have caused enormous damage on allied territory, specifically on German soil. The author argued that the exercise “succeeded in demonstrating to the German people that for them [...] a tactical nuclear war fought over their territory might be essentially indistinguishable from a strategic nuclear war”[18]. The same may occur to Russia in case it decided to use TNWs in areas near its border, or even on its soil, in case of an aggression, and this scenario has raised doubts about the actual convenience of including them in planning[19].

Interestingly, the literature referring to this issue makes no reference to an offensive, first-use strike. Deterrence is the departing concept when considering the impact of a launch of TNWs – and Russia being the first actor to strike is an event considered in the frame of a defensive war, meaning that Moscow is aggressed, and it is not the case in the invasion of Ukraine[20].

[14] A.F. Woolf, Nonstrategic Nuclear Weapons, Congressional Research Service, March 7, 2022, <https://crsreports.congress.gov/>.

[15] G. Arbman and C. Thornton, Russia's Tactical Nuclear Weapons. Part 1: Background and Policy Issues, Swedish Defence Research Agency, November 2003.

[16] G.E. Hudson, Russian Perspectives on Tactical Nuclear Weapons, in T. Nichols et al. (ed.), Tactical Nuclear Weapons and NATO, Strategic Studies Institute, US Army War College (2012).

[17] P.E. Dyer, Will Tactical Nuclear Weapons Ever be Used?, Political Science Quarterly, Vol. 88, No. 2 (Jun., 1973), pp. 214-229.

[18] Ibid.

[19] G.E. Hudson, op.cit.

[20] Evidence collected from exercises conducted by Russia at the beginning of 21st century showed that also tactical nuclear weapons were used to retaliate against a hypothetical NATO attack. This points further at the defensive conception of TNWs. See G. Arbman and C. Thornton, Russia's Tactical Nuclear Weapons. Part 2: Technical Issues and Policy Recommendations, Swedish Defence Research Agency, February 2005.

Further elements support the unlikelihood of a tactical nuclear strike in an offensive fashion. First, TNWs have been considered useful negotiation tools in the post-Cold War period, rather than actual, employable military assets. Some experts believe that Russia can exploit the leverage that it enjoys from the possession of such armaments to get concessions from the US and NATO in strategic, security terms[21]. Even scholars as Suchy and Thayer[22], that are more prone to believe that the “escalate to de-escalate” approach is deeds and not just words, think that TNWs may be used – also – as a negotiation tool. In more general terms, they have highlighted their political role as more relevant than the military one for NATO, though admitting that they are relatively more useful for Russia, because of its technological inferiority and the border issues with China[23].

Second, Dyer[24] underscored an issue related to decision-making process that increases the obstacles for launching a nuclear strike. The author mentioned a strand of literature that argues that leaders, when a decision has to be made in policymaking, tend to adopt the option that is the most acceptable by all the interested parties. This means that the option has to gather consensus among elites and wider public opinion. It is true that Russia has less constraints in terms of public support, but Dyer regarded this constraint applicable to the USSR by then – and there are reasons to believe that it applies on President Putin as well, given the complex procedure for launching nuclear weapons[25] and the lack of unanimous consensus in the strategic community[26]. The military establishment has exposed itself very little in the media, and the most prominent figures of the circle have not made announcements as aggressive as those of former President Medvedev – in fact, Minister of Defense Shoigu said that Russia is ready to start talks to define a solution for the war at an international gathering in China at the end of October 2023[27]. Considering that the defense minister is one of the key figures in the command-and-control system of nuclear weapons[28], his apparently moderate position may reflect a distance between the military and political establishment that may hinder a nuclear strike. Then, it is legitimate to ask whether President Putin has to confront with a divided leadership, and consequently whether he would actually make to order such a strike.

The points mentioned in the above lines make clear that launching TNWs is not so much easier than strategic ones. Just because they are thought to be used on the battlefield, this does not mean that there are simpler decisional mechanisms or different calculations, nor that their impact would be less significant either. Russia prefers calling TNWs nonstrategic nuclear weapons (NSNW)[29], reflecting a wider set of considerations and consequences that have to be taken into account. The impact in terms of damage may be enormous and hinder a potential advance of the troops in the theatre hit by the strike, in addition to the damage to civilians.

[21] P. Suchy and B.A. Thayer, Weapons as political symbolism: the role of US tactical nuclear weapons in Europe, *European Security*, 23:4, 509-528, DOI: 10.1080/09662839.2014.932772.

[22] Nevertheless, the ongoing strengthening of the ties with Beijing reduces the likelihood of a conflict, and consequently the actual need of such weapons – at least until bilateral relations will deteriorate again.

[23] P.E. Dyer, op.cit.

[24] K. Giles, op.cit.

[25] A. Baklitskiy, op.cit.

[26] Euractiv.com, Ministro della Difesa russo, l'Occidente cerca di espandere la guerra dall'Ucraina all'Asia-Pacifico, October 30, 2023, <https://euractiv.it/section/mondo/news/ministro-della-difesa-russo-occidente-cerca-di-espandere-la-guerra-dallucraina-allasia-pacifico/>.

[27] Reuters, Putin filmed in China accompanied by officers with Russian nuclear briefcase, October 18, 2023, <https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/putin-filmed-china-accompanied-by-officers-with-russian-nuclear-briefcase-2023-10-18/>

[28] G.E. Hudson, op.cit.

Nevertheless, a high level of destruction can be reached in case of an exchange of TNWs; the impossibility for Ukraine to retaliate and studies that show that it is possible to limit considerably the fallout effects of a launch[30] may suggest that Moscow may feel less “cons” in the cost-benefit analysis and decide for a strike. But the doubts about the military effectiveness of TNWs[31], coupled with the non-concentrated position of Ukrainian troops, reduce further the expected gains of such a move.

The sum of the aspects concerning tactical nuclear weapons plays against their utilization on the battlefield, since their impact may be as destructive as that of strategic ones. Nevertheless, Russia owns them, and regardless of their cost-effectiveness President Putin may resort to them. But it is important to take into consideration the features of the conflict which Moscow is fighting, adding another layer of analysis that may be decisive to discard the possibility of a nuclear strike in the war.

[30] Dr S. Kaushal and S. Cranny-Evans, Russia's Nonstrategic Nuclear Weapons and Its Views of Limited Nuclear War, Royal United Services Institute, June 21, 2022, <https://rusi.org/explore-our-research/publications/commentary/russias-nonstrategic-nuclear-weapons-and-its-views-limited-nuclear-war>.

[31] Ibid.

The invasion of Ukraine: what Russia is fighting for?

When assessing the military options, States are expected to select the one which is the most proportionate to the objective that they want to achieve. This mechanism should work in all conflicts, regardless of their features, not because it is necessary to detect rational dynamics to try to explain them and their potential developments, but because of the inherent features of war – that, as Clausewitz argued, is the continuation of politics with other means. Since wars are not fought for the sake of glory, but because they are thought to be the optimal tool to achieve a political objective, the hierarchical relationship of political and military aspects must be taken into account to understand whether TNWs keep the latter subordinate to the former.

The potential repercussions of a nuclear strike in terms of proliferation of such weapons and reaction of the international community, Russia's partners included, have received great attention, but they are secondary[32]. The primary issue to consider is what Russia wants to achieve in Ukraine. Apparently, Moscow has not drawn the line that needs to be crossed in order to declare victory. This is because what really matters to President Putin is to find a political outcome that will justify the whole war effort, making it acceptable to the domestic public opinion[33]. It is for this reason that he and his leadership have undertaken a process of modification of the narrative of the conflict, transforming the attempt to “de-nazify” Ukraine into a forced, pre-emptive operation in response to the pressure of the West – the US, NATO, and the European Union. Whereas the former has failed to gather substantial consensus, the latter seems to be more effective in justifying the protracted war effort and the failure of some operations in Ukraine[34].

[32] K. Giles, *op.cit.*

[33] M. Provoost, What is Russia's Theory of Victory in Ukraine?, Modern War Institute, March 31, 2023, <https://mwi.usma.edu/what-is-russias-theory-of-victory-in-ukraine/>.

[34] M. Zygar, Putin's New Story About the War in Ukraine: How Russian Propaganda Went From “Denazification” to Fighting the West, Foreign Affairs, November 10, 2023, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/ukraine/putins-new-story-about-war-ukraine>.

The Russian leadership is stressing the “existential threat” posed by the western countries to portray a situation of necessary, dogged defense. This framing has induced to think that Moscow may escalate further its operations, linking the conception of the conflict to the highest, most brutal form of war[35]. The resort to nuclear weapons may then become conceivable. Nevertheless, such a move would contrast with what Russia really wants to achieve and the general political framework of this conflict. Interestingly, the enemy detected by Moscow has never been the Ukrainian people, but Kyiv’s leadership, which is harming the welfare of the nation – a nation that is considered as a part of the Russian civilization[36]. Russia seems to want to rescue a subjugated people, whose leadership is trying to eradicate bonds with Moscow that “brought tangible benefits to people – both in Russia and Ukraine”[37].

The way that the conflict has been framed would be contradictory with a nuclear strike. Launches of TNWs on Ukrainian soil would be detrimental mostly for the people who Russia wants to protect – some fallout effects would be inevitable, and creating an advantage in tactical terms would mean to strike near the regions that have been annexed, causing damage to civilians who Russia considers to be its own citizens. An issue of legitimacy and approval would emerge for Moscow, likely raising problems of order in the post-war phase. Even if “de-Ukrainization”[38] became the objective, it could not mean the extermination of a society that is part of the Russian civilization.

If Russia wants to define a sphere of influence that set off the end of the western hegemony in the international system[39], it needs to preserve the countries that are bound to that sphere. The same problem that Dyer mentioned in Operation Carte Blanche applies to Russia and Ukraine.

Another aspect to take into consideration is the framing of the “existential threat” that brought Moscow to invade Ukraine and its relationship with the strategic set of the conflict. Russia has acknowledged that it is conducting an offensive operation within a broader defensive war which has been waged by the West through hybrid means[39]. Two further elements point against the conception of the utilization of TNWs.

First, nuclear weapons are always conceived as deterrent assets to use for defensive purposes in cases of extreme dangers, and this contrasts with a first strike in a strategic offensive – against a non-nuclear country, which makes impossible to trigger hypothetical misunderstanding-related escalation dynamics. A nuclear strike in such scenario is a mostly rational move, which would upset the established dynamics of nuclear coercion. Second, it is difficult to frame a nuclear strike as a proportionate response to a hybrid threat or attack, even if it is deemed existential. An aspiring leader of a new international order cannot afford to set such a precedent.

[35] M. Provoost, op.cit.

[36] Russian Presidency, Article by Vladimir Putin “On the Historical Unity of Russians and Ukrainians”, July 12, 2021, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/66181>.

[37] Ibid.

[38] C. Apt, Russia’s Eliminationist Rhetoric Against Ukraine: A Collection, Just Security, September 13, 2023, <https://www.justsecurity.org/81789/russias-eliminationist-rhetoric-against-ukraine-a-collection/>.

[39] Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, The Concept of the Foreign Policy of the Russian Federation, March 31, 2023, https://mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/fundamental_documents/1860586/.

[40] D. Adamsky, op.cit.

Conclusion: facts, not fears.

Alarmism in wars that involve nuclear powers cannot be anything but detrimental. The possession of nuclear weapons per se raises inevitably a risk of a strike, an escalation, a holocaust. But it is necessary to look at the probability, the only reliable parameter on which to base assessments and policies. The objective of this paper was to bring to the fore elements that keep the probability of a nuclear strike significantly low, by creating a connection between how Russia fights and what it wants to achieve in Ukraine. Obviously, these elements are not the sole into play in this conflict – others may upset the conditions and raise the risk.

The direct involvement of NATO and the provision of nuclear weapons to Ukraine are the most extreme cases and can be easily excluded at the time of writing. It has been pointed that Crimea may be a critical point if Ukraine were capable to retake the peninsula, given its strategic and geopolitical value; but the question of whether its retake would pose an existential threat to Russia should be asked – first by Russia itself[41].

Psychological-moral issues may be influential as well[42]; if President Putin found himself in a situation in which perceives that he has no other choice but to use TNWs to protect Russia, he could prefer bringing the world on the verge of an all-out nuclear war. Finally, it cannot be forgotten that war is a human affair, entailing irrational elements and misperceptions that may bring to decisions that are not cost-effective. As it has been underlined, a nuclear strike will always be possible as long as nuclear power are involved, but rational, observable facts are the only tools to make a credible assessment of such an event.

Therefore, in the current scenario, the Russian reiterated threat cannot be considered credible, “because [Russia] uses nuclear deterrence for something it is not suited for: as a coercive tool in a protracted war of conquest”[43].

[41] As Giles (op.cit.) and Baklitskiy (op.cit.) noted, the retake by Ukraine of portions of the formally annexed lands has not provoked a nuclear escalation – a signal that makes the current Russian doctrine resemble the “massive retaliation” of the 1950s Dwight Eisenhower administration.

[42] T.M. Dolan (2013), Unthinkable and Tragic: The Psychology of Weapons Taboos in War, International Organization, 67, pp 37-63 doi:10.1017/S0020818312000379

[43] J. Lavikainen, op.cit.