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Russian Nuclear Roulette[Visit the WEBSITE](#)[Receive the E-NEWSLETTER](#)*Russian Nuclear Roulette**Abstract:*

Nuclear weapons played a central role in the security strategy of both blocs during the Cold War. The war in Ukraine, which pits the two nuclear superpowers of the moment against each other, has brought this all back in full force.

With China, North Korea and Iran likewise threatening the non-proliferation system, there is a risk of a global nuclear arms race.

The Ukrainian war seems to be headed for a protracted duel that will devastate the country and put Europe to the test. Some analysts argue, either from the viewpoint that Russia will never use nuclear resources or because the inherent risk must be assumed, that an unmitigated defeat must be inflicted on Moscow.

Others consider that Russian nuclear blackmail is not a bluff, and that in any case the risk is unacceptable, fearing that the Kremlin will go to the last extreme rather than accept a humiliating defeat.

It is not easy to maintain the right balance between firmness and prudence, considering that President Putin has proven to be a dangerous enemy and seems determined not to accept unmitigated failure.

Keywords:

Nuclear weapons, Ukraine war, nuclear proliferation, Russia, United States, China.

***NOTE:** The ideas contained in the **Analysis Papers** are the responsibility of their authors. They do not necessarily reflect the thinking of the IEEE or the Ministry of Defence.

La ruleta nuclear rusa

Resumen:

Durante la Guerra Fría el arma atómica jugó un papel central en la estrategia de seguridad de ambos bloques. El conflicto ucraniano, que enfrenta a las dos superpotencias nucleares del momento, le ha devuelto toda su vigencia.

Con China, Corea del Norte e Irán, además, amenazando el sistema de no proliferación, se corre el riesgo de una carrera nuclear global.

La guerra de Ucrania parece abocada a un duelo prolongado que devastará dicho país y pondrá Europa a prueba. Unos analistas argumentan que, porque Rusia nunca utilizará el recurso atómico o bien porque hay que asumir el riesgo correspondiente, hay que imponer a Moscú una derrota sin paliativos.

Otros consideran que el chantaje nuclear ruso no es ningún farol y, en cualquier caso, el riesgo es inasumible porque temen que el Kremlin acuda al último extremo antes que aceptar una derrota humillante.

No es nada fácil mantener el debido equilibrio entre firmeza y prudencia, teniendo en cuenta que el presidente Putin ha demostrado ser un enemigo peligroso y parece determinado a no aceptar un fracaso completo.

Palabras clave:

Arma nuclear, guerra de Ucrania, proliferación nuclear, Rusia, Estados Unidos, China.

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Introduction

Nuclear weapons played a central role in the security strategy of both blocs during the Cold War. The threat was all but forgotten after the fall of the Berlin Wall, leaving behind what seemed to have been nothing more than a prolonged nightmare. Unfortunately, the war in Ukraine, which pits the two nuclear superpowers of the moment against each other in what can increasingly be defined as a *proxy war* between Washington and Moscow¹, has brought this all back in full force.

In late March, Russian President Vladimir Putin announced that his country intended to deploy tactical nuclear weapons in Belarus, once again threatening the terrifying prospect of the use of these weapons in the ongoing war. There is a broad consensus that this armed conflict is the most dangerous nuclear confrontation since the 1962 Cuban missile crisis.

And the problem doesn't end here. North Korea is more threatening than ever, Iran is very close to having an atomic weapon, and China could join the US and Russia as the third nuclear superpower in the next decade, triggering a global nuclear arms race.

To date, the availability of enough Russian nuclear warheads to destroy major cities in Europe and the US is what is deterring Western powers, led by Washington, from defeating Russia's military invasion of Ukraine by imposing a punishment on the Kremlin commensurate with its audacity. The nuclear dimension is thereby modulating the allies' gradual response in their support for Kiev, precisely to avoid a situation in which the Eurasian power might be tempted to make an irreversible decision.

When President Joe Biden was asked why his country had not taken a firmer stance against Russia shortly after the war began, he replied, "Because that would mean World War III".

Thanks to its enormous nuclear arsenal (more than 1,500 warheads deployed on missiles, submarines and bombers capable of reaching US territory), the Russian

¹ LAMO DE ESPINOSA, E. "Historic turning points. The historical invasion and the decline of Western power" Strategic panorama, IEEE (2023) p.65. March 2023. Available at: [The Sino-Russian strategic partnership remains in still in good health.](#)

Note: all links are available as of 11/4/2023.

Federation is currently - and for a short time - the only country in the world that can be defined as an existential threat to the US².

Whether or not Russia will be able to use such a weapon in the context of the war in Ukraine is a matter of debate, and it also conditions the strategic response. This paper aims to introduce this debate and the arguments that underpin it, and examine its significance for European and global security.

Background

If, during the Cold War, the US balanced its comparative disadvantage in Europe with the USSR in terms of conventional weapons through nuclear weapons, since the dissolution of the Soviet bloc in 1991 and, more specifically, since the Primakov doctrine of 1996, Russia has been applying the same formula, but in the opposite direction. Faced with enormous American superiority in terms of conventional weapons, Russia is turning to its nuclear arsenal to remain a relevant power³.

Since the Soviet collapse and as mutual trust has faded, the Kremlin has revised its strategic worldview on an ongoing basis, placing increasing importance on the nuclear dimension. Although Russia's military doctrines in 2000, 2010 and 2015 contemplated the use of nuclear weapons, it was not until 2020 that the country first published a specific nuclear policy under the name *Fundamentals of the State Policy of the Russian Federation in the Field of Nuclear Deterrence*⁴.

This document specifies that Russia "regards nuclear weapons exclusively as a means of deterrence" and that Russia's nuclear deterrence policy "is defensive in nature", emphasising that Russia maintains forces that could "inflict unacceptable damage on a potential adversary... under any circumstances"⁵.

² KRISTENSEN, H. and KORDA, M. "Russian nuclear forces, 2019", *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*.

³ FRIAS SÁNCHEZ, C. "Perspectivas de la proliferación nuclear en Estados Unidos, Rusia y China", *Cuaderno de Estrategia IEEE 205: La no proliferación y el control de armamentos nucleares en la encrucijada*. September 2020, p. 46. Available at: [La no proliferación y el control de armamentos nucleares en la encrucijada \(ieee.es\)](https://www.ieee.es/Galerias/fichero/docs_analisis/2022/DIEEEA27_2022_JOSCAS_Nuclear.pdf).

⁴ CASTRO TORRES, J. I. "A new step towards a nuclear nightmare in Europe", Analysis Paper IEEE 27/2022. Available at: https://www.ieee.es/Galerias/fichero/docs_analisis/2022/DIEEEA27_2022_JOSCAS_Nuclear.pdf

⁵ *Russia's Nuclear Weapons: Doctrine, Forces and Modernization*. Congressional Research Service. April 2022. Available at: [*R45861 \(congress.gov\)](https://www.congress.gov/records/45861)

To this effect, Russian nuclear doctrine considers the use of nuclear weapons in the following cases:

- when it has received reliable information about a ballistic missile launch attacking the territory of the Russian Federation and/or its allies (launch on warning);
- in response to the use of nuclear weapons or other weapons of mass destruction by an adversary against the Russian Federation and/or its allies;
- in case of an enemy attack on critical governmental locations or military sites of the Russian Federation, which endangers the response of the nuclear forces, and
- against aggression aimed at the Russian Federation with the use of conventional weapons where the existence of the state is endangered.

The preventive use of nuclear weapons during conventional conflicts is thereby ruled out, but not that Moscow can threaten to escalate to nuclear use as a means of deterring a conflict that threatens the existence of the state⁶.

Russia has the nuclear triad - land, naval and air capabilities - inherited from the USSR, the components of which it is largely modernising. The process, still ongoing, began in 1998, receiving a major boost from 2008 onwards following the announcement of NATO enlargement to Ukraine and Georgia at the Bucharest summit and the subsequent Russian military intervention in South Ossetia and Abkhazia. In December 2020, Putin reported that around 86% of Russia's strategic nuclear force was composed of modern weapons, a figure he hoped to increase to 88% by 2021⁷.

The 310 intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBM) with launch sites throughout the Russian Federation (figure 1) can deliver up to 1,189 warheads, of which only about 800 are deployed and available for use. Russia is replacing Soviet-era ICBM with new models, highlighting the importance of hypersonic glide vehicles, as announced by President Putin on 1 March 2018, whose combination of manoeuvrability and high speed poses significant challenges to conventional missile defence⁸.

The naval submarine-launched ballistic missile (SLBM) force, key to retaining the capability to respond to enemy nuclear attack, is deployed with the Northern and Pacific

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ KRISTENSEN, H. and KORDA, M., "Russian nuclear forces, 2020", *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*.

⁸ *Russia's Nuclear Weapons: Doctrine, Forces and Modernization*. Congressional Research Service. April 2022.

fleets. By early 2020, it had a total of nine strategic submarines of three different types, with missiles on board capable of carrying 144 ballistic missiles and up to 656 nuclear warheads⁹. Older submarines are currently being replaced by Borei-class submarines equipped with Bulava missiles, of which the seventh out of a planned total of ten by 2027, Emperor Alexander III¹⁰, has just been delivered to the Russian navy.



Figure 1. Basis of the Russian nuclear triad. Source: Congressional Research Service

Russia has an estimated 60 to 70 bombers capable of delivering up to 12 to 16 nuclear cruise missiles, deployed at two bases in the Russian Southeast and Far East.

The Russian Armed Forces also have a variety of so-called tactical systems that can deliver some 2,000 warheads at medium and short ranges.

The Russian nuclear threat and the Ukrainian war

The US has sufficient conventional military capability to destroy Russian military capabilities, both those deployed in Ukraine and those it maintains on its own territory. If

⁹ [Strategic fleet - Russian strategic nuclear forces \(russianforces.org\)](https://russianforces.org/)

¹⁰ FAULCONBRIDGE, Guy. "Putin to boost Russia's nuclear forces after suspending arms treaty", *Reuters*. February 2023. Available at: [Putin to boost Russia's nuclear forces after suspending arms treaty - The Globe and Mail](https://www.theglobeandmail.com/world/article-putin-to-boost-russias-nuclear-forces-after-suspending-arms-treaty/)

it does not do so, it is out of fear of a nuclear response from Russia. To reinforce its deterrent effect, since the start of the war in Ukraine, President Putin has repeatedly threatened their use. Indeed, it is Russia's relative weakness that makes the possible use of tactical nuclear weapons in particular not only more likely but also strategically relevant.

Michael Kofman and Ana Loukianove Fink state that, according to their military thinking and put into practice in major exercises, "the Russian military does not believe that the limited use of nuclear weapons will necessarily lead to uncontrolled escalation, and that the calibrated use of conventional and nuclear capabilities is not only possible, but can have decisive deterrent effects"¹¹. This gives special relevance to tactical nuclear weapons without which, given the overwhelming US conventional superiority and the sheer irrationality of using strategic nuclear weapons, Russia would have to forgo strategic engagement with the US.

Russia's *National Security Strategy* of July 2021 considers indisputable Russia's great power status "as a country capable of conducting an independent foreign and domestic policy and of effectively resisting attempts to exert external pressure". Tactical nuclear weapons are the main backbone of this aspiration, widely shared by Russian elites, which is at the heart of President Putin's foreign and security policy.

For the moment, what is clear is that the strategic-operational context of the Ukrainian war is being modulated by Russia's nuclear deterrent. Washington measures its military support for Kiev incrementally, so that Ukrainian troops contain and even push back Russian troops but do not have the capability to strike deep into Russian territory, nor to inflict a defeat on Russian forces deployed in eastern Ukraine of a magnitude that would cause the Kremlin to face the dilemma of a possible tactical nuclear response.

The outcome is a protracted armed conflict that is degenerating into a war of attrition that threatens to devastate Ukraine and damage Europe, with the danger of serious fractures in the coalition. In a war of this kind, Russia maintains a significant advantage over Ukraine by virtue of its larger population and ability to mobilise its army.

¹¹ KOFMA, M. and FINK, A. L. "Escalation Management and Nuclear Employment in Russian Military Strategy", *War on the Rocks*. 19 September 2022. Available at: [Escalation Management and Nuclear Employment in Russian Military Strategy - War on the Rocks](#)

Faced with what appears, at least for the moment, to be a stalemate, a strategic debate is taking place with two opposing positions, the arguments of which are well reflected in two articles in *Foreign Affairs*.

Sam Greene and Alina Polyakova advocate that "the message to Putin and his generals must be clear: there is no compromise solution available, no line of defence except Russia's own border, and no limit to Western resolve"¹².

In contrast Nina Tannenwald states that

"it is impossible to say definitively whether increased Western support for Ukraine will provoke a Russian nuclear response. Nobody really knows. The nuclear risks in this war are considerable, as NATO is becoming increasingly involved in Ukraine's defence, while Russia appears less and less restrained. Deterrence could fail in multiple ways, either through intentional acts or miscalculations [...]. Biden's duty is to ensure that the war does not escalate into a nuclear conflict with Russia. No one wants Russian nuclear blackmail to succeed, for both moral and strategic reasons. But responsible Western leaders need to seriously weigh the likelihood of a calamitous event"¹³.

In the first case, the argument goes like this:

"Putin can and will turn anything short of a complete military collapse into a victory for the domestic groups that keep him in power [...]. The West must be clear that anything short of the full restoration of Ukraine's sovereignty and territorial integrity will represent a catastrophic defeat for the US and its European allies [...]. Revisionist powers such as China, Iran and Russia would soon start looking for holes in NATO's nuclear umbrella [...]. The Ukrainians themselves can potentially decide that they want to stop fighting [...]. If that happens, Western governments should be prepared to support Kiev in negotiating an agreement that would guarantee the country's security and put it on the road to NATO and EU membership [...]. However, Western leaders and public opinion should be under no illusions about what would happen if a choice like this were imposed on Ukraine simply because Western public opinion has grown tired of a war they themselves are not even fighting [...]. In a very short time, this would mean more war, not less war [...]. One year into the war, two things are clear: First, the supply of increasingly powerful weapons has

¹² GREENE, S. and POLYAKOVA, A. "Russia Wants a Long War: The West Needs to Send Ukraine More Arms, More Quickly", *Foreign Affairs*. 16 March 2023.

¹³ TANNENWALD, N. "The Bomb in the Background: What the War in Ukraine Has Revealed About Nuclear Weapons", *Foreign Affairs*. 24 February 2023.

not led to unbridled Russian escalation; and second, relative Western restraint has not stopped Putin from shelling Ukrainian civilian targets"¹⁴.

In the opposite direction, Tannenwald states that

"Russian leaders have repeatedly warned of escalation if the West continues to arm Ukraine, but the argument goes that the Kremlin will not actually resort to nuclear weapons or break the taboo on their use. As a result, many observers, mostly outside the government, are dismissive of the risk of nuclear escalation [...]. Critics of the West's prudence label it "self-deterrence", but it is in fact simply deterrence [...]. During the Cold War, the West did not respond militarily when the Soviet Union invaded Hungary in 1956 and Czechoslovakia in 1968. Western leaders stayed away because of the unacceptable risk of nuclear escalation"¹⁵.

Tannenwald quotes Marsha Gessen to counter those who see Russia's decision not to use nuclear weapons yet as proof that it never will, or that Putin is a rational actor and will not risk the calamity and pariah status that would follow any Russian use of such a weapon: "In the Russian president's twisted worldview, the use of nuclear weapons could be justified as a rational course of action"¹⁶.



Figure 2. Potential Ukrainian offensive up to the Sea of Azov. Source: Prepared internally

¹⁴ GREENE, S. and POLYAKOVA, A. *Op. cit.* A. *Op. cit.*

¹⁵ TANNENWALD, N. A. *Op. cit.*

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

Given the very serious consequences of their use, the possibility of Russia resorting to atomic weapons is currently not an issue in the operational sphere, not because of sending one type of weapon or another to Ukraine, but because they will only be used as a last resort, depending on a possible Russian military debacle, the impact on the Kremlin's own power system and the deep internal crisis this may trigger. Graham Allison argues that if Putin and his regime face what they perceive to be a humiliating defeat, it is highly likely that they could use nuclear weapons¹⁷. Michael Ignatiev put it simply and clearly in an *article in ABC*: "If Ukraine wins, Russia loses, and if Russia loses, or fears it is about to lose, Putin may use his nuclear weapons. If he does, we are in an even darker world than the one we live in now"¹⁸.

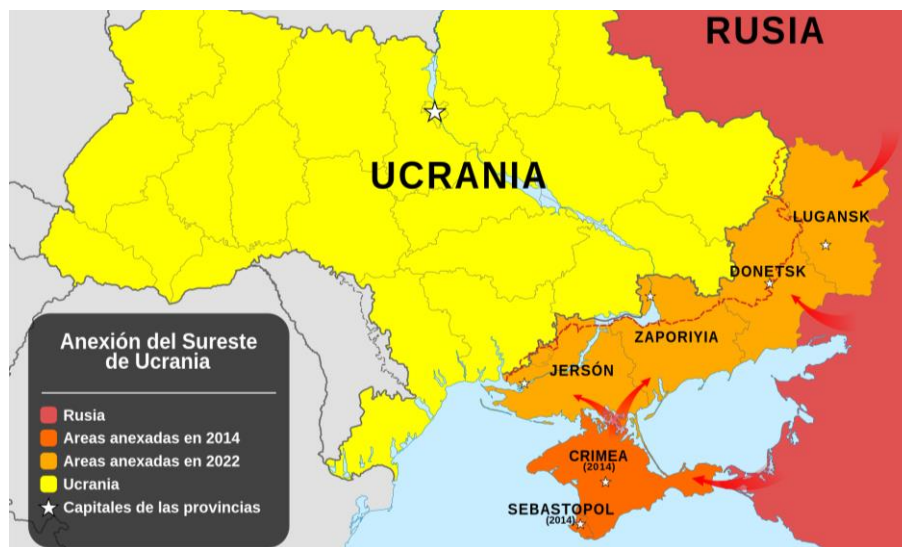


Figure 3. Annexation of Donetsk, Lugansk, Kherson and Zaporizhzhia to Russia. Source: Wikipedia

A scenario that is potentially closer timewise and reasonably feasible in which the Kremlin might consider using atomic weapons (Figure 2) is a Ukrainian offensive reaching the Sea of Azov (1). This would result in the irretrievable loss of Crimea, which would be indefensible if it loses its land link with Russian Federation territory, given the extreme vulnerability of the Kerch Strait bridge (2). Putin's decision in September 2022 to incorporate the four - largely occupied - Ukrainian provinces into the territory of the Russian Federation (Figure 3) would enable the use of atomic weapons to be justified in line with his nuclear doctrine.

¹⁷ ALLISON, G. *Online conference at CDA Institute*. Available at: [Putin Can't Survive a Humiliating Loss in Ukraine - Graham Allison - YouTube](#)

¹⁸ IGNATIEV, M. "Putting an end to the war?", *ABC Third*. 23 February 2023.

At the moment, there are no answers to so many strategic dilemmas.

In order to be credible, deterrence in general and nuclear deterrence in particular need to be backed by a strong will to act. Likewise, one cannot respond to nuclear blackmail with major concessions because that would lead to strategic paralysis and systematically falling victim to subsequent threats, ceding the initiative and giving the challenging power even more dangerous power.

The degree to which threats of weapons of mass destruction use are ignored or considered mere bluffs weakens their strategic effect, but as successive red lines are crossed, the threshold of their use also moves dangerously close. It is not easy to have a clear idea of where the red lines are in Ukraine; one would have to penetrate the mind and psychological consistency of the Russian leadership, which has so far shown itself to be willing to go further than expected. It is therefore a duel of wills in a game of Blackjack where raising of the stakes having caused the unwanted response is discovered too late. Consequently, the response to intimidation of this type must be both firm and cautious.

The problem is further compounded by the fact that it is a coalition. The different states involved in the war vary in their willingness to take risks, depending on how the war might affect each of them and their capacity to respond. Berlin and London, for example, have different perspectives, with Germany having more at stake and being on the road to regaining European defence centrality, without a nuclear weapon.

If war escalates, either horizontally and vertically, it will impact unevenly on allies in the energy, economic, military and global geopolitical contexts. It could also be the case that some states push to cross certain red lines and the consequences end up being paid by others. An ill-measured response, whether too much or too little, could consequently weaken or even break the cohesion of the European and Western alliance.

Some believe, and rightly so, that highlighting the dangers arising from the nuclear dimension of the war in Ukraine is inappropriate because it might create doubts among less committed allies. This may certainly be so, but to ignore this reality is to adopt the attitude of a lamb meekly accepting its sacrifice when we are actually talking about an existential danger!

Non-proliferation is a problem from every angle

After the Cold War, the US focused on maintaining its existing nuclear arsenal and modernising platforms to provide a deterrent capability against Russia, and on developing missile defences focused on dealing with North Korea and a possible Iranian threat, not on countering Russia or China¹⁹.

Today it is clear that neither international condemnation nor sanctions have succeeded in preventing North Korea, whose ballistic missile tests reached their very peak in 2022, from becoming the ninth nuclear power on the planet, from having a second-strike capability and from intensifying its destabilising posture. Iran too, which already has 84% enriched uranium, is getting closer and closer to being able to build an atomic bomb despite the sanctions. With the realm of nuclear proliferation sufficiently diminished, and following years of Washington and Moscow's deconstruction of the last remnants of the Cold War system of disarmament agreements, Vladimir Putin has raised the alarm even further with the announcement that Russia is "temporarily suspending" its adherence to the New Start or Start III agreement²⁰.

What is happening in China, which until recently kept a relatively small nuclear force, is even more worrying. Washington was largely unaware of the prospects for a rapid expansion of China's nuclear forces, and has recently acknowledged that Beijing has probably surpassed it in the number of nuclear-capable ICBM ground-based launchers.

"China's missile force already exceeds the ability of US missile defences to intercept ICBMs aimed at the US mainland. In addition, according to unclassified estimates, China has the capability to simultaneously strike counter-value (US cities) and counter-force (US first-strike nuclear capability)"²¹.

China's stockpile of nuclear warheads is expected to triple to 1,000 by 2030. Along with the construction of silos, it has developed a new ICBM capable of being armed with up to ten nuclear warheads with hypersonic launchers, which will allow the Chinese military to further expand its land-based arsenal to 3,000 warheads. Beijing has also been

¹⁹ CARAFANO, J. "The future of the US.-China nuclear arms race", *GIS*. 21 March 2023. Available at: [The Chinese-United States nuclear arms race takes off \(gisreportsonline.com\)](https://www.gisreportsonline.com)

²⁰ "New sources of disquiet", *Foreign Policy Weekly*, no. 1313. 27 February 2023.

²¹ CARAFANO, J. *Op. cit.*

modernising its submarine-launched ballistic missile force and its long-range bomber fleet with a view to having a robust triad. This will put the Asian giant on a par with the current nuclear superpowers, Russia and the US. It seems unlikely that Beijing will stop this process, given President Xi Jinping's refusal to engage in arms control talks²².

Country	Strategic deployed	Tactics deployed	Reserve/ Not deployed	Operational	Total inventory
<i>Russia</i>	1,674	0	2,815	4,489	5,889
<i>The US</i>	1,670	100	1,938	3,708	5,244
<i>France</i>	240		50	290	290
<i>China</i>	0		410	410	410
<i>The UK</i>	120		105	105	225
<i>Israel</i>	0		90	90	90
<i>Pakistan</i>	0		170	170	170
<i>India</i>	0		164	164	164
<i>North Korea</i>	0		30	30	30
Total:	3,704	100	5,772	9,576	12,512

Figure 4. Estimated global warhead inventory 2023. Source: Federation of American Scientists

"It is difficult to overstate the importance of this Chinese effort. By developing such a nuclear arsenal, China is upsetting the bipolar nuclear system [...]. By approaching parity with the two existing great nuclear powers, China heralds a paradigm shift to something far less stable with a greater risk of a nuclear arms race and greater incentives for states to resort to nuclear weapons in a crisis. [...]. In a tripolar system, it is simply impossible for each state to maintain nuclear parity with the combined arsenals of its two rivals"²³.

²² KREPINEVICH, A. "The New Nuclear Age: How China's Growing Arsenal Threatens Deterrence", *Foreign Affairs*. May/June 2022.

²³ Ibid.

"The effectiveness of the US nuclear umbrella, or extended deterrence, could be called into question. This extended deterrence means safeguarding allied nations from the threat of nuclear retaliation. NATO and treaty allies such as South Korea and Japan are therefore included in the nuclear deterrent. Having a robust first-strike capability against the US raises questions such as would Washington risk nuclear war and the loss of cities like Washington and New York to defend Estonia... or Taiwan?"²⁴.

Sooner or later, the expansion of China's nuclear arsenal will not go unanswered in India. The question is, what will Pakistan do then? What's more, will we see a nuclear South Korea or Japan, or new nuclear powers in the Middle East? "The 21st century could become the century of unbridled proliferation, with more than 15 nuclear weapon states"²⁵.

By highlighting the decisive strategic impact of nuclear weapons, the Ukrainian war "is sending a message to the rest of the world: If you have nuclear weapons, never give them up. If you don't have them, spare no effort to obtain them [...]. President Putin's repeated nuclear threats have undermined non-first use assurances and the traditional role of nuclear weapons as a last resort in case of national survival"²⁶.

"There is also a growing danger that nuclear weapons could be used on the basis of misjudgements, false attack warnings or other miscalculations. With the help of rapidly changing technology, US adversaries, including non-state actors, could use cyber-attacks to disrupt nuclear weapons command and control and early warning systems - systems that can start the clock on a possible nuclear response, leaving governments only minutes to decide whether or not to proceed"²⁷.

The strategic horizon is full of storm clouds

All the winds seem to be blowing in the opposite direction to global peace and stability, and the international system has increasingly fewer effective mechanisms to manage arms control, cooperative security and non-proliferation. In view of these alarming

²⁴ CARAFANO, J. *Op. cit.*

²⁵ ADAM, R. "Beyond Russia's war against Ukraine", *GIS*. 13 February 2023. Available at: [When stalemate ends, aftermath will be ugly in Russia-Ukraine war \(gisreportsonline.com\)](https://www.gisreportsonline.com/when-stalemate-ends-aftermath-will-be-ugly-in-russia-ukraine-war)

²⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁷ MONIZ, E. and NUMM, S. "Confronting the New Nuclear Peril", *Foreign Affairs*. 05 April 2023.

developments, finding new approaches to prevent the use of nuclear weapons has never been more urgent. The avenues available to reduce the atomic threat, strategies built up since the 1962 Cuban missile crisis, continue to narrow²⁸.

The prudence shown during that crisis holds lessons for today:

"When so many commentators in Russia and in the West are calling for a resolute victory for one side or the other in Ukraine, some Americans and Europeans assume that the use of nuclear weapons in the current crisis is completely ruled out and that the West can therefore safely corner the Kremlin, winning a comprehensive victory for Ukraine. But many people in Russia, especially around Putin and among his propagandists, defiantly say that 'there would be no world without Russia', meaning that Moscow should prefer nuclear Armageddon to defeat. If such voices had prevailed in 1962, we would all be dead by now"²⁹.

Habermas reflects on the war process, concluding that

"what is important is the preventive nature of the talks, while preventing a long war from claiming even more lives, causing more destruction and ending up being faced with a desperate choice: to intervene actively in the conflict or to leave Ukraine to its fate to avoid trigger the first world war between nuclear-armed powers"³⁰.

"As long as there is war in Ukraine, there is a real risk of nuclear escalation in the region. The most effective and lasting solution to reduce this risk would be a negotiated ceasefire", something today still far from being able to be put into practice. Beyond Ukraine, the growing reliance on nuclear weapons for deterrence by the states that possess them threatens the future of humanity. "A new global security paradigm is urgently needed"³¹.

Conclusion

The war in Ukraine has restored nuclear weapons to the strategic prominence they lost after the Cold War ended, both at European and global levels.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ RADCHENKO, S. and ZUBOK, V. "Blundering on the Brink: The Secret History and Unlearned Lessons of the Cuban Missile Crisis", *Foreign Affairs*. 03 April 2023.

³⁰ HABERMAS, J. "Negociaciones de paz ya", *El País*, Ideas n.º 406. 19 February 2023.

³¹ MONIZ, E. and NUMM, S. *Op. cit.*

China, North Korea and Iran threaten the non-proliferation system, so there could soon be 15 nuclear states.

This powerful military capability is currently shaping the US and its allies' response to Russia's invasion of its Slavic neighbour.

Washington is calibrating military support for Kiev so that Russian forces are being pushed back but without risking their serious defeat, which could bring the Kremlin closer to the abyss of using atomic weapons.

This strategic design leads to a dead end and will tend to prolong the war, with huge penalties for Ukraine itself and serious risks for Europe.

The West is torn between two response strategies:

- Arguing that President Putin will never use nuclear power or that the risk must be assumed, some propose expelling Russian troops from the entire territory of Ukraine and imposing a Carthaginian defeat on Moscow.
- Others believe that Russian nuclear blackmail is not a bluff and that the risk is unaffordable, fearing that the Kremlin will go to the ultimate extreme rather than accept a humiliating defeat.

Not all allies view this serious dilemma from the same perspective, nor do they have the same willingness to take risks that can take on an existential nature.

It is not easy to maintain the right balance between firmness and prudence. What we do know is that the Russian leader is a dangerous enemy, he has already gone too far, and he does not seem willing to give in.

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