

Dismissal, Dissuasion and Deterrence: Optimizing Responses to Putin's Brinksmanship - Pavel K. Baev



New hands are now on one of Russian nuclear suitcases: Andrey Belousov has been appointed Defense Minister, [much to surprise](#) of most Russia-watchers. He is a career medium-high level bureaucrat, but has no experience whatsoever with hard security matters, and it is far from certain that he will manage to control the huge apparatus built over 12 years by Sergei Shoigu, who was moved to the prominent but power-lacking position of the secretary of the Security Council. Fortunately, the seasoned Chief of the General Staff General Valery Gerasimov continues to steer the operations of Russian Armed Forces, but he used to work in tandem with Shoigu, and now has to perform solo.

The power of decision on every step on the ladder of nuclear escalation remains, however, with President Vladimir Putin, who was perhaps more than a little upset with Shoigu's confident command of the Victory Day parade and found it imperative to ascertain that the authority of the Commander-in-Chief is entirely and unquestionably his. In the last couple of months, Putin has been [upping his rhetoric](#) declaring Russia "[ready for nuclear war](#)" and warning that the airbases supporting the deployment of nuclear-capable F-16 fighters are [legitimate targets](#) for strikes. Suspecting that words are not making the due impression, he announced - one day prior to the inauguration ceremony - that exercises involving [non-strategic nuclear forces](#) would be conducted in the Southern military district, as well as in Belarus.

The content and timing of these exercises are yet to be specified, and while it is possible for the Western leaders to insist that there is [nothing unusual](#) about this drill, it is in fact the [first time](#) ever that Russian non-strategic forces are used as means of political messaging. Rejecting this threat, US State Secretary [Antony Blinken](#) made a visit to Kyiv confirming the expansion of US support. Ukrainian long-distance drone strikes on Russian [oil refineries](#) continued undeterred.

Dismissal of Russian blackmail is one useful political method, but it needs to be complemented by persistent dissuasion from escalating the rhetoric, which in the

publications of some [prominent Moscow experts](#) has become plain irresponsible. The channels of communication with many Russian dialogue partners are presently blocked, which makes signals prone to misinterpretation. One party that commands priority attention in Moscow is China, and it was hardly a coincidence that Putin announced the forthcoming nuclear exercises on the day that President Xi Jinping started the [state visit](#) to France. President Emmanuel Macron has disconcerted Putin with the proposition for sending NATO troops to Ukraine, and Russian nuclear messaging has failed to warn the ambitious French leader against further elaborations on the policy of [strategic ambiguity](#).

Xi Jinping clearly dislikes nuclear brinkmanship and [tried to impress](#) upon Putin the need in greater self-restraint. We can hardly presume any profound disagreements on this matter hidden behind the demonstrative cordiality of Putin's visit to China, but [insightful Russian analysts](#) have explicitly excluded any nuclear topics from the real agenda of face-to-face conversations. China's support for Russia's war effort remains limited and conditional, but Russian experts [tend to believe](#) that the prospect of Ukraine's victory remains unacceptable for Beijing. They prefer to ignore Chinese analyses, like Feng Yujun's article in [The Economist](#), that argue about a high probability of Russia's defeat.

As long as Russian troops continue offensive operations in Donbas and secondary attacks toward Kharkiv, the question of resorting to nuclear instruments will remain theoretical. The tide of war can, however, shift, as it did several times in the course of the long war. The expanded delivery of the US and European military aid can make a difference if Ukraine increases its efforts at domestic mobilization, which cannot be taken for granted. Still, the widespread speculations in the Western commentary about the consequences of Russia [winning the war](#) are quite probably completely off target. The sustained attacks [yield little gains](#) at the cost of high casualties; the capacity of [defense industry](#) to deliver the necessary hardware is at its peak and may go down; the exhausted Russian army may find itself unable to control the course of battles and keep the strategic initiative. One major issue with such possible, and perhaps even probable, turn in the war trajectory is that the Kremlin is not ready for it - and may resort to desperate measures.

The strategy of deterrence, which has supplied the most reliable guidelines for NATO in countering security threats, now needs another modification aimed at addressing possible Russian attempts at bringing nuclear weapons not only into political confrontation, but also into practical execution of military operations. The [voices in Moscow](#) advocating for delivering a nuclear strike in order to restore the credibility of the “fear factor” may appear extreme and self-serving, but they are neither deranged nor marginal. Reinforcing the credibility of Western deterrence posture is a major and urgent task for political leaders, and the forthcoming NATO summit in Washington D.C. must make a concerted effort in this difficult direction. The question of providing Ukraine a [clear track](#) toward joining the Alliance, which is so often elevated as the central issue for this summit, is actually of secondary importance comparing with the really pivotal matters of granting Ukraine the capability for winning the war and managing the consequences of Russia’s defeat.

Deterrence is a multi-dimensional “[mind game](#)”, and it can be augmented by a seemingly incompatible activity - the peace diplomacy. The carefully prepared [conference in Switzerland](#) (which may supply the theme for my next Opinion article) should aim at more substantial outcome than just elaborations on President Volodymyr Zelensky’s “[peace formula](#)”. The success is by no means guaranteed, and China’s participation, even as an observer, is not certain, but substantial progress toward ending the devastating and potentially catastrophic war with a just peace can be achieved. One country that is perfectly positioned for contributing to this progress and persuading Russia that the non-invitation to Switzerland doesn’t signify rejection of its security concerns is Turkey. President Putin is due to make the long-promised visit to Ankara, and the high-level discussion provides an opportunity to grant Russia an acceptable way out of the current deadlock - and to ensure that nuclear risks remain manageable.



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