

Spectre of Escalation Over the Ukraine War - Pavel K. Baev



The first striking sentence of the [Communist Manifesto](#) issued in 1848 – A spectre is haunting Europe – the spectre of communism – has long become a historical anecdote. Even the leftist fringe cherishes no illusions about the unity of proletariat. A different spectre, however, is looming over Europe – the spectre of nuclear escalation of the Ukraine War. It bedevils the workings of the EU bureaucracy, not even a moderately efficient machine in the best of times. It determines the increase of spending on defence in every state budget, at the expense of priorities dear to many lobbyists and activist. It even interferes with the long-promised visit of President Vladimir Putin to Ankara, prompting him to demand an [escort of Russian fighter jets](#).

Putin himself summoned this spectre at the very start of the war threatening the

West with the consequences “[you have never seen in your entire history](#)” if it would try to interfere with his aggression. Large-scale exercise of Russian strategic forces, re-scheduled to February 2022 from the usual window in October, were supposed to add convincing power to that warning. The West, nevertheless, rallied in support of Ukraine with determination and unity entirely unexpected by Moscow, and Putin’s further attempts at [upping the ante](#) in brinksmanship have been no more impressive than his initial demarche. Oscillation rather than escalation has been the trend in Russia’s resorts to nuclear threats, and the latest peak in this trajectory was reached on 12 September 2024, as Putin promised to “[make appropriate decisions](#)” in response to what he described as NATO entering into a war with Russia.

Putin’s reasoning that the forthcoming decision on granting Ukraine the right to use Western longer-range missiles for strikes into Russia would amount to altering dramatically “[the very nature, the very essence of the conflict](#)” is dubious in strategic terms and nonsensical as political discourse. The Kremlin still refuses to call the war by its name instructing its propaganda machine to stick to the term “special military operation” (typically abbreviated as SVO), and it is inconceivable how one or a series of missile strikes might change its vague nature. The US-supplied MGM-140 ATACMS tactical missile has a range of 300 km and can target some Russian [forward airbases](#), but it certainly cannot reach such strategic bases as [Engels](#) or [Olenya](#), repeatedly hit by Ukrainian drones. Oil refineries deep in Russia’s territory are [going up in flames](#) increasingly often, and the remnants of the Black Sea Fleet are forced to abandon not only Sevastopol but also the main base in [Novorossiysk](#).

What has really changed the course and even the character of the long war is the Ukrainian offensive into the Kursk region launched on August 6 and leaving a sizeable part of Russia’s territory under [hostile occupation](#). Instead of calling for [mobilization](#) aimed at liberating homeland, Putin opted for downplaying the debacle. Obsessed with the notion of controlling the strategic initiative, Russian Commander-in-Chief ordered to continue attacks on Pokrovsk in Donbass and to push out the “[bandits](#)” from the Kursk region. Six weeks into implementation, this strategy has failed on both counts: Ukrainian defences around Pokrovsk still hold, while Russian counter-attacks in the [Kursk front](#) are facing stiff resistance.

Neither this embarrassing fiasco nor Ukrainian strikes on [Moscow oil refinery](#) are deemed by Putin worthy of issuing a threat of nuclear escalation. His propensity to invoke the image of “[red lines](#)” has backfired, and President Volodymyr Zelensky made many international headlines with his mockery of “[a sick old man in the Red Square](#)” attempting to draw such boundaries. Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov tried to warn against [making jokes](#) about Russian “red lines”, but his diplomatic posturing rang hollow, particularly as China persisted with promoting its initiative on [no-first-use](#) of nuclear weapons.

The lull in Russian brinksmanship ended with Putin’s demarche aimed at distorting Western decision-making on Ukrainian missile strikes and [timed to the meeting](#) between US President Joe Biden and UK Prime Minister Keir Starmer centred on this issue. Biden found it opportune to dismiss the blackmail by asserting that he wasn’t “[thinking much about Putin](#)”, but the decision remains pending, much to Kyiv’s [frustration](#). There is certainly no need in making a big announcement about granting Zelensky his plea, but careful practical work with the Ukrainian forces on precise targeting of forthcoming strikes and minimizing civilian casualties is necessary.

The best response to Putin’s new resort to nuclear threats would be a strong show of unity among NATO allies, and the US-UK meeting of minds, important as it is, cannot quite deliver on this demand. Germany’s stance is important and remains ambivalent, as Chancellor Olaf Scholz, shaken by the defeats in regional elections in Saxony and Thuringia, keeps [avoiding the decision](#) on supplying the Taurus KEPD 350 missile to Ukraine. [Experts in Moscow](#) are examining the political battles in Germany with utmost attention, checking whether this weak link in the pro-Ukraine coalition might give up.

Transformation of nuclear deterrence is a theme of far more prominence in Russian expert debates than one would expect of a matter of such sensitivity and secrecy. Characteristically, [Sergei Karaganov](#), who positions himself as champion of the cause of nuclear escalation, remained silent on the issue of Ukrainian offensive in the Kursk region, but has instantly reinstated his claim after Putin’s remarks on a looming direct confrontation with NATO. Even such sober and

respected experts as [Alexei Arbatov](#) are warning about the mistake that Western policy-making might make in assuming that Russia would never resort to delivering a nuclear strike.

Over-estimating Russia's readiness to unleash a nuclear war and yielding to Putin's blackmail would indeed be a greater mistake than ignoring the threat and assuming that common strategic sense will always prevail in Moscow. Multi-optional risk assessments must be updated with every twist and turn in the trajectory of the ever-changing war, and messaging, which is the key instrument in the [mind game](#) of deterrence, needs to be fine-tuned accordingly. Putin is an anxious, ambitious and often misinformed counter-part in the fluid confrontation, in which his grasp on power is staked against the survival of humankind. NATO can master resources for denying him a victory in the war of his making, but a much broader coalition needs to be built for exorcising the spectre of nuclear catastrophe.



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To cite this work: Pavel K. Baev, "Spectre of Escalation Over the Ukraine War", *Panorama*, Online, 20 September 2024,

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