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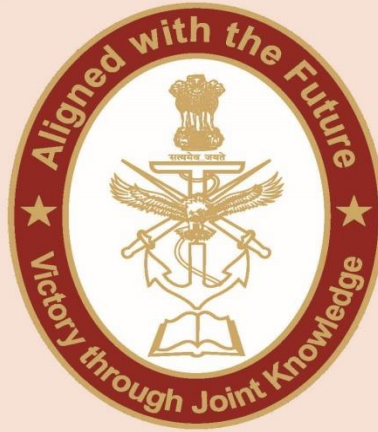
WEB ARTICLE

THE WAR IN UKRAINE AND CHURNING OF NUCLEAR DETERRENCE

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The war in Ukraine, and Russia's nuclear threats are bringing about a renaissance of nuclear deterrence and rearmament. It has resulted in the geopolitical context deteriorating to the point where progress on nuclear disarmament and non-proliferation seems almost impossible. The nuclear element has been operating in the background of this conflict from the beginning of the war when on 24 February President Putin said, "Russia remains one of the most powerful nuclear states. Moreover, it has a certain advantage in several cutting-edge weapons. In this context, there should be no doubt for anyone that any potential aggressor will face defeat and ominous consequences should it directly attack our country".¹

Incidentally on 03 January 2022, the leaders of the five nuclear weapon states had in a joint statement stated, "We affirm that a nuclear war cannot be won and must never be fought. As nuclear use would have far-reaching consequences, we also affirm that nuclear weapons—for as long as they continue to exist—should serve defensive purposes, deter aggression, and prevent war."² This opening line of the statement was first made by President Ronald Reagan and Soviet President Mikhail Gorbachev at their summit in Geneva in 1985.

For nuclear-weapon states and their allies, the mutual threat of total annihilation serves to prevent wars and thus guarantees peace and security. In the current crisis, however, the downsides of nuclear deterrence are becoming visible. In the war against Ukraine, Russia is using the nuclear threat to facilitate war and increase its chances of a favourable outcome; instead of employing its nuclear arsenal to defend or prevent conventional military escalation.

In the words of Vice Admiral Vijay Shankar; Russia has 'turned the idea of deterrence on its head'; and he stated that; "Moscow is using the deterrence value of its nuclear arsenal not to protect Russia but rather to provide space for conventional action. The Kremlin introduced an explicit nuclear dimension through its various declarations".³

Seventy seven years ago was the last time a nuclear weapon was used. Looking back over the past three decades, there's been an effort to design a nuclear order through treaties, understandings and patterns of behaviour intended to manage a process in which the role of nuclear weapons would be minimised and to make sure the complexities of it could be resolved. Nuclear weapons were supposed to move gradually into the background of world affairs. Fred Kaplan in his introduction to 'The Bomb' wrote, "For thirty years after the Cold War ended, no one thought much less worried, about nuclear war. Now almost everyone is fearful. But fear takes the form of a vaguely paralysed anxiety. Because of the long reprieve from the bombs shadow, few people know how to grasp it's dimensions they've forgotten, if they ever knew".⁴ He said the 'holiday from history ended on 08 August 2017 when President Trump warned North Korea; "they will be met with fire and fury like the world has never seen".

Jeffrey Lewis writing in 'War on The Rocks' has said; "A deterrent relationship is one in which our choices are sharply constrained by existential fear".⁵ The war in Ukraine can be termed as a failure of deterrence. Kyiv didn't sufficiently deny benefits, impose costs, and/or encourage restraint sufficient to stop Russia from invading. At the same time, the invasion was an extended, general deterrent failure for NATO and EU states who were unable to find the means to dissuade Russia from using force to settle territorial disputes which began with the annexation of Crimea. ⁶

Yet, some perceive Ukraine as a 'deterrent success' in terms of thresholds and confining the war to Ukraine as well as limiting the use of weapons of mass destruction. From this perspective the events since 24 February demonstrate the reliability of nuclear deterrence. After all, the NATO is not directly intervening in Russia's war. One of the reasons that they don't want a direct conflict with Russia – but not the only reason – is because at the end of the escalation ladder between Russia and the West is the possibility of the use of nuclear weapons.⁷

Likewise, the nuclear threat has been operating for Russia as well: the leadership in Russia is aware that the US, UK, France and NATO as an alliance are nuclear-armed. They know that Russia also needs to take their nuclear weapons seriously. Presently, the conflict has been limited in scope but can this be solely attributed to the presence of nuclear weapons on both sides. Whereas there are those who doubt the credibility of NATO's nuclear deterrent and believe its weakness emboldened Russia's aggressive behaviour. Russia's invasion of Ukraine has been hailed as both a triumph and failure for deterrence. Can both be true⁸? Paradoxically, that seems to be the cases there are proponents and opponents for both extremes.

An argument often presented is that Russia's war of aggression would not have taken place if Ukraine had possessed nuclear weapons. In fact, after the collapse of the Soviet Union, Ukraine never had the command over the arsenal stationed on its territory. But do nuclear weapons provide a blanket ban on use of conventional forces? Nevertheless, possession of nuclear weapons have become more attractive to some countries in light of the Russian invasion. The breach of the Budapest Memorandum has no doubt shaken confidence in security guarantees.

At present, NATO and Russia have a mutual interest in not extending the war beyond Ukraine's borders. However, if Moscow fears a comprehensive defeat as the war progresses, it has the option of resorting to the use of tactical nuclear weapons. President Putin's nuclear rhetoric been intended to sow fear in the minds of Western decision-makers to focus on the rising nuclear threat thereby shaping thinking regarding their physical intervention in the conflict and thus limiting assistance to Ukraine in order to mitigate the increased risk of Russian nuclear strikes. So far the

role that nuclear weapons play appears to be the beginning of a new phase.

Tactical nuclear weapons and scenarios of 'limited' nuclear warfare have long been gaining importance. This broadening of nuclear deterrence, as demonstrated by Russia's threatening posturing, challenges the nuclear taboo that nuclear doctrines are supposed to reinforce. This reveals a paradox of nuclear deterrence: the more it is used and the broader nuclear threats are framed, the higher the likelihood of a nuclear escalation.⁹

Wars always assume a more destructive form. As terrible as scenes from war zones are; the tragedy compounds along with the risks of a world war if there were a mushroom cloud. When great powers compete, to include fighting proxy wars through states which was first witnessed in Peloponnesian War between Athens and Sparta to the present conflict in Ukraine, they must manage escalation risks. When nuclear states compete, the rungs of the escalation ladder can bring states to a point beyond which nuclear weapons lose their deterrent value and become a means to force capitulation. The US National Security Adviser Jake Sullivan told CBS in September; "The Russian President's nuclear warnings are "a matter that we have to take deadly seriously."

"We have communicated directly, privately at very high levels to the Kremlin that any use of nuclear weapons will be met with catastrophic consequences for Russia, that the United States and our allies will respond decisively, and we have been clear and specific about what that will entail," he said.¹⁰ Russia's 2014 Military Doctrine and 2020 Basic Principles of State Policy of the Russian Federation on Nuclear Deterrence both state that it "reserves the right to use nuclear weapons in response to the use of nuclear and other types of weapons of mass destruction against it and/or its allies." The Basic Principles state that Russian nuclear forces exist to protect "the sovereignty and territorial integrity of the state."

President Joe Biden has said that if Russia uses nuclear weapons, their response would be "consequential... depending on the extent of what they do will determine what response would occur".¹¹ "We have our own military potential. If anyone thinks that we won't use it if there is a serious threat, then they are mistaken," said Dmitry Novikov, Deputy Chair of the Foreign Affairs Committee in the Duma, Russia's lower house of

Parliament. "And if you're ready to use these kinds of weapons, we won't let ours get rusty." ¹²

As per Dr Matthew Harries of RUSI, the feeling is that "the moment of maximum danger would come if and when Russia faced a large-scale defeat and there was a threat to President Putin's grip on power. We may not be at that moment of maximum danger yet, but we're closer to it than we were at the beginning of the war. For that reason, it's not surprising that Putin has grasped the nuclear hammer he has in his toolbox again".¹³ Elon Musk tweeted in response to a Twitter user asking his opinion on the possibility of a nuclear war and World War III. "If Russia is faced with the choice of losing Crimea or using battlefield nukes, they will choose the latter. We've already sanctioned/cut off Russia in every possible way, so what more do they have left to lose?"

The war in Ukraine has highlighted certain fragilities in nuclear deterrence. Policy makers will need to articulate how the concept works to manage escalation thresholds as well as how it provides options that counter the Russian approach to coercion and the emerging Chinese concept of war control. Ukraine is the beginning of a new era.¹⁴ Nuclear weapons are existential weapons and relate to the highest stakes a country feels it is risking. Hence the belief is that nuclear use is unlikely in the Ukraine war because of the grave consequences that could potentially follow.

However, Russia has been willing to use what it sees as the power of nuclear risk and the fear of nuclear weapons as part of its strategy and concept of strategic deterrence. Russia is willing to bring nuclear fear and nuclear risk into play in the conduct of strategy at various escalation levels, through rhetorical and military means, and to use what it sees as bargaining power through fear of nuclear use.¹⁵ There was a chance to make nuclear weapons less relevant. But the Ukrainian conflict has proven otherwise and in fact will force more countries to weigh the necessity for developing a nuclear arsenal. We are in a world which has not been able to wean itself away from nuclear weapons and they are now increasing in importance.

The lesson probably remains that nuclear weapons have a role in a strategy that the world hoped they wouldn't. The darker side of nuclear deterrence is that the war is exposing needs to be understood if this

cornerstone of global arms control is to remain. The Ukrainian War has exposed the risks and dangers of managing a crisis in a world in which nuclear weapons are a significant part of strategy.

There are now concerns that Russia may be entering a new phase of escalation with its annexation and declaration that it would defend newly annexed territories with nuclear weapons. The truth is nuclear threats only really deter if they're considered credible and carry some degree of risk. Mere possession of nuclear weapons does not result in automatic nuclear deterrence. However, we should be prepared to live in a world where nuclear weapons can no longer be relegated to the background.

CERTIFICATE

The paper is author's individual scholastic articulation. The author certifies that the article is original in content, unpublished and it has not been submitted for publication/ web upload elsewhere and that the facts and figures quoted are duly referenced, as needed and are believed to be correct.

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Endnotes

¹ Full text of Vladimir Putin's speech announcing 'special military operation' in Ukraine, 24 February, 2022, <https://theprint.in/world/full-text-of-vladimir-putins-speech-announcing-special-military-operation-in-ukraine/845714/>

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⁵ Jeffrey Lewis & Aaron Stein, "Who is Deterring Whom? The Place Of Nuclear Weapons in Modern War", 16 June 2022, <https://warontherocks.com/2022/06/who-is-deterring-whom-the-place-of-nuclear-weapons-in-modern-war/>

⁶ Benjamin Jensen, "The Two Sides of Deterrence in Ukraine", 30 March, 2022, Center for Strategic and International Studies <https://www.csis.org/analysis/two-sides-deterrence-ukraine>

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¹¹ ibid

¹² ibid

¹³ Jonathan Eyal & Dr Matthew Harries, "Ukraine and the Consequences for Nuclear Deterrence" Royal United Services Institute for Defence and Security Studies, 14 October 2022, <https://rusi.org/explore-our-research/publications/commentary/ukraine-and-consequences-nuclear-deterrence>

¹⁴ Benjamin Jensen, "The Two Sides of Deterrence in Ukraine", 30 March, 2022, Center for Strategic and International Studies <https://www.csis.org/analysis/two-sides-deterrence-ukraine>

¹⁵ Jonathan Eyal & Dr Matthew Harries, "Ukraine and the Consequences for Nuclear Deterrence" Royal United Services Institute for Defence and Security Studies, 14 October 2022, <https://rusi.org/explore-our-research/publications/commentary/ukraine-and-consequences-nuclear-deterrence>