Averting acute escalation in Russia's war against Ukraine

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Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine and annexation of Ukrainian territories in 2022 have spelled the end of the European security order codified since the late Cold War. They also confirm the collapse of post-Cold War international legal and normative constraints on Russia's use of force. President Vladimir Putin has flouted the territorial sovereignty of Ukraine and has proceeded to dismember the state by force. These actions, alongside defensive western assistance to Ukraine, have raised serious risks of a horizontal escalation of the war (through military actions beyond Ukraine in Europe, even extending to NATO territory), or of a vertical escalation to the possible use of nuclear weapons. Western states have been compelled to assess these risks of their indirect involvement in an unprecedented major conventional war in Europe launched by a nuclear power.

Analysts and officials both emphasize the risks. A specialist report published in 2023 by the RAND Corporation identified a spectrum of risks of inadvertent escalation—plausible horizontal escalation scenarios, but risks of deliberate escalation by Russia, NATO or Ukraine were also posed. Further deliberate Russian nuclear escalation was judged to be highly plausible.[1] The official 2023 *Annual threat assessment of the US intelligence community* warned of the potential the war presented for a direct Russian military conflict with US and NATO forces.[2] In turn, in early 2024 a senior Russian official noted that Russian diplomats in the West were working 'in a crisis management mode, aiming at preventing an escalation into a really massive conflict'.[3]

Mitigating these risks remains a critical scholarly and policy challenge. This article uses theoretical insights and an analytical framework from strategic studies to interpret and help structure our thinking about how these risks should be understood, how they have been addressed and how to continue to avert the most acute forms of military escalation. This is supported by an empirical analysis of

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1 Bryan Frederick, Mark Cozad and Alexandra Stark, *Escalation in the war in Ukraine: lessons learned and risks for the future* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2023), pp. 27–71.

2 *Annual threat assessment of the US intelligence community* (Washington DC: Director of National Intelligence, 2023).

3 Deputy Foreign Minister Sergey Ryabkov, cited in 'Russia "done" with Western Europe "for at least a generation"—Lavrov', *RT*, 18 May 2024.

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three years of diplomatic signalling and discourse by Russia, Ukraine and western states from the onset of full-scale war in February 2022 to the beginning of the second Trump administration in the United States in January 2025.

Escalation risk examined

Russia's war against Ukraine has singular characteristics. The theatre of operations covers a major European state on Russia's borders and even involves Russia's own territory; the scale of warfare exceeds any military action in Europe since the Second World War; and Russia's language of nuclear intimidation in the context of the war has been extensive and pervasive. This gives rise to important questions. How has Russia sought to exploit the risk of escalation in the specific and unusual conditions of this major war? How have western states sought to mitigate that risk and has their strategic thinking drawn from the experience of the Cold War? How have Russia, western states and Ukraine communicated their stance over escalation and to what effect?

In addressing these questions, this article contributes to scholarship on contemporary strategic studies. It reaffirms in the first place how classic formulations of nuclear deterrence have continued to operate and shape the conduct of nuclear armed powers, even in this novel war. But it also demonstrates how Russia's effort at nuclear intimidation or coercion, while resisted, has had some success in constraining western military aid to Ukraine. The article identifies how, in the absence of more formal means to regulate a direct clash of major powers, alongside deterrence certain limited ad hoc and flexible ground rules of escalation control have developed piecemeal around the war.

The research presents the overall argument that escalation management or control has depended on *a combination of threats and of restraint*, which interact dynamically with each other. It also confirms the crucial role of strategic signalling in the study of contemporary Russian, as well as Ukrainian and NATO states' foreign policies over the war. This is expressed in a language of intimidation, resolve but also ambiguity, in addition to demonstrative military policies. The empirical research analyses how western powers engaged in 'salami-slicing' incremental upgrades in their military assistance to Ukraine during this process of signalling to offset the risks of more acute escalation.

The analysis has several significant policy implications. First, credible deterrence to avert dangerous escalation has been very much a function of political will and resolve, which must be sustained. Yet in resisting Russian nuclear intimidation, ambiguity and uncertainty over specific responses should be understood as part of the effort to avert acute escalation. Secondly, limited key restraints on western support for Ukraine reflected the novel dangers of responding to Russian extreme actions and rhetoric. But US policy appeared overcautious, certainly from early 2023, with serious repercussions for Ukraine and hence for the security outcome for western Europe. Finally, the article identifies a number of developments that unavoidably sustain the significant medium-term risk of escalation.

There exists hardly any academic literature specifically on escalation risk in this new war, to which this article seeks to contribute.[4] A detailed study in 2020 examined Russian concepts on strategic deterrence and the role of nuclear weapons, as related to escalation management.[5] A small body of writing exists on escalation in post-Soviet Russian military doctrine—a doctrine which has uncertain influence on Russian policy outputs in the novel conditions of the current war.[6] This follows a large debate on Cold War-era escalation dynamics (see the next section). There is also growing scholarly interest in the role of nuclear weapons in Russia's war on Ukraine and its effort at nuclear coercion, which relates to escalation control.[7]

The theoretical framework of the article to evaluate escalation risks is premised on an interaction between strategic threats and restraint. It combines classical insights of Thomas Schelling about the operation of deterrence at the higher level as the 'threat that leaves something to chance', with the pioneering work of Alexander George in the later Cold War years on the informal regulation of conflicts and crises through restraint between nuclear armed powers. This reliance on earlier strategic thinking reflects the continued relevance of deterrence in framing the policies of a western coalition of support for Ukraine to avert a direct clash of nuclear-armed powers.

The empirical content of the article assembles evidence of efforts to manage the escalatory risks of the first three years of Russia's aggressive war against Ukraine. The primary method adopted (see further below) is to examine diplomatic and strategic signalling in communicating risk, which I term *discursive signalling*. Such communications shape expectations about the nature and limits of permissible conduct and thresholds of risk. I conduct a qualitative analysis of the discourse between state leaders and officials in Russia, Ukraine, the US and its major NATO allies, as expressed in a systematic review of speeches, statements, communiqués and interviews drawn from the period between February 2022 and January 2025. The study of this discourse is interpretive, relying on the exercise of judgement.

The article has four parts. First, a theoretical framework on averting serious escalation is derived from past scholarship. An interpretation of Russian efforts at nuclear intimidation and manipulating risk around the current war follows.

[4] See Janice Gross Stein, 'Escalation management in Ukraine: "learning by doing" in response to the "threat that leaves something to chance"', *Texas National Security Review* 6: 1, 2023, pp. 29–50, http://doi.org/10.26153/tsw/47414. This focuses more on deterrence than specific categories of restraint.

[5] Michael Kofman, Anya Fink and Jeffrey Edmonds, *Russian strategy for escalation management: evolution of key concepts* (Washington DC: CNA, 2020).

[6] For example, Dmitry Adamsky, *The Russian way of deterrence: strategic culture, coercion and war* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2024), pp. 100–110; Glen E. Howard and Matthew Czekaj, eds, *Russia's military strategy and doctrine* (Washington DC: Jamestown Foundation, 2019); Andrei Kokoshin, Yuri Baluevsky, Viktor Esin and Aleksandr Shlyakhturov, *Voprosy eskalatsii i deeskalatsii krizisnykh situatsiy, vooruzhennykh konfliktov i voin* [Escalation and de-escalation of crises, armed conflicts, and wars] (Moscow: Lenand, 2021), pp. 1–88.

[7] Anna Clara Arndt, Liviu Horovitz and Michal Onderco, 'Russia's failed nuclear coercion against Ukraine', *The Washington Quarterly* 46: 3, 2023, pp. 167–84, https://doi.org/10.1080/0163660X.2023.2259665; Giles David Arceneaux, 'Whether to worry: nuclear weapons in the Russia–Ukraine war', *Contemporary Security Policy* 44: 4, 2023, pp. 561–75, https://doi.org/10.1080/13523260.2023.2260175; Keir Giles, *Russian nuclear intimidation: how Russia uses nuclear threats to shape western responses to aggression*, research paper (London: Royal Institute of International Affairs, 2023), https://www.chathamhouse.org/2023/03/russian-nuclear-intimidation. (Unless otherwise noted at point of citation, all URLs cited in this article were accessible on 16 June 2025.)

Then the primary empirical analysis is presented; this focuses on western military assistance to Ukraine and the role of tacit ground rules of escalation control. In conclusion, the findings are reviewed and policy implications suggested.

Theory and methods: strategic threats, strategic restraint and discursive signalling

Scholarly literature on the phenomenon or process of escalation is rooted in extensive debates around deterrence and military coercion. In the strategic thinking of the 1950s and 1960s the notion of escalation was viewed both as a series of deliberate steps to raise the stakes of conflict and as an involuntary process, drawing parties in a war into belligerencies of expanding scope and intensity.[8] The concern of this article lies with the higher-order risks of nuclear confrontation or the direct clash of opposing great power military forces. In this respect, both Schelling's conceptualization of the persuasive threat induced by nuclear weapons and George's thinking on states' efforts to restrain escalatory processes offer enduring insights.

For Schelling, such persuasion depended on the unavoidable element of risk for a power in making nuclear threats, 'the threat that leaves something to chance'. Uncertainty was inherent in escalation. It was beyond the control of either side and could originate from an accident or inadvertent action, from another party or from defects in decision-making.[9] One side could demonstrate that they were willing to escalate a conflict in a way that might get out of control if the adversary failed to comply with coercive demands. The core insight was recognition of how 'the adversary's behaviour could be influenced not by a definite threat to do something to him but because the wrong step could provoke a situation in which terrible things *might* happen to him'. So 'it was the fear of nuclear war itself that deterred'.[10]

In this sense, making a threat that left something to chance becomes an effort to manipulate risk, later termed brinkmanship. It could develop into a competition in risk-taking.[11] But such risk manipulation also involved tacit bargaining, out of a common interest in keeping confrontation below the nuclear threshold. That shared interest creates space for the parties to engage in coercive bargaining, with threats and the limited use of force. Indeed, subsequent research on psychological factors has sought to explain why 'chance' can generate coercive leverage in nuclear crises while leaders still retain agency over the 'choice' to escalate. Pauly and McDermott go beyond Schelling, who tended to discount the role of human decision-makers in crises as well as their psychological biases. They argue: 'Nuclear threats can be credible in the face of assured retaliation precisely because of the uncertainty and unpredictability of normal human emotions'. Incorporating this

[8] See Herman Kahn, *On escalation: metaphors and scenarios* (New York: Frederick A. Praeger, 1965); Richard Smoke, *War: controlling escalation* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1977), pp. 19–35.
[9] Thomas C. Schelling, *The strategy of conflict* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1960), p. 188.
[10] Lawrence Freedman, *The evolution of nuclear strategy* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 1981), p. 223 (emphasis in original).
[11] Thomas C. Schelling, *Arms and influence* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1966), pp. 93–5, 100–105.

psychological dimension, 'chance becomes leverage via individual differences in risk tolerance, emotional self-control, and resilience'.[12]

Such theorizing over the judicious use of threats coexisted with strategic thinking on how to avoid dangerous conflict, which became central to escalation risk management and the effort to reduce uncertainty during the Cold War. Both dimensions involved careful diplomatic signalling. In essence, testing limits and signalling through threats or pledges of restraint became a competition between a strategy to *manipulate* uncertainty and a strategy to *reduce* uncertainty. Elements of nuclear brinkmanship continued after the high-stakes confrontation of the Cuban missile crisis in October 1962; military leaders continued to plan for contingencies below and beyond the nuclear threshold.[13] However, political leaders had peered into the abyss and had little interest in issuing threats that might leave something to chance. The dominant means of escalation management for the rest of the Cold War became avoidance of direct superpower conflict and options for mutual restraint.

In a major study in 1988, George emphasized that Soviet-US rivalry had been regulated by a 'basic rule of prudence … namely that *neither superpower shall initiate military action against the forces of the other superpower*'. This tacit rule meant avoiding any direct armed clash with the uniformed personnel and forces of the other superpower and its allies, even at the lowest level. A corollary in regional conflicts was the tacit rule that '*neither superpower shall permit a regional ally to drag it into a confrontation or shooting war with the other superpower*'.[14] This was consistent with the finding of Kaplan's major study on the Soviet use of force that 'Moscow [was] extremely cautious about using armed forces when U.S. military units were already engaged in violence'.[15] The western allies tended to exercise parallel restraint. The Cuban missile crisis was exceptional for almost crossing that threshold.[16]

In these conditions, George found some evidence of more extended informal normative restraint between the opposing powers. This could be tacit or verbalized and evolved by codifying existing practice and building on it incrementally. Therefore, such norms developed through experience, which offered useful precedents or benchmarks. They were rules of prudence rather than of law, aimed at creating greater predictability in particular world regions, such as the Middle East—a region George defined as posing a serious risk of uncontrolled confrontation. For example, one such norm identified in this region was that of credible intervention when the regional ally of a superpower was threatened with imminent defeat.[17]

[12] Reid B. C. Pauly and Rose McDermott, 'The psychology of nuclear brinkmanship', *International Security* 47: 3, 2023, pp. 9–51 at pp. 10–11, 51, https://doi.org/10.1162/isec_a_00451.

[13] For Soviet thinking, see Daniel S. Papp, 'Soviet views of escalation/limited war', in Carl J. Jacobsen, ed., *Strategic power: USA/USSR* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1990), pp. 162–8.

[14] Alexander L. George, 'U.S.–Soviet efforts to cooperate in crisis management and crisis avoidance', in Alexander L. George, Philip J. Farley and Alexander Dallin, eds, *U.S.–Soviet security cooperation: achievements, failures, lessons* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), pp. 581–99 at pp. 583–4 (emphasis in original)

[15] Stephen S. Kaplan, *Diplomacy of power: Soviet armed forces as a political instrument* (Washington DC: Brookings Institution, 1981), p. 677; Hannes Adomeit, 'Soviet crisis prevention and management: why and when do the Soviet leaders take risks?' *Orbis* 1: 30, 1986, pp. 54–5, 59–60.

[16] Dennis M. Gormley and Douglas M. Hart, 'Soviet views on escalation', *The Washington Quarterly* 7: 4, 1984, pp. 71–84 at pp. 75–7, https://doi.org/10.1080/01636608409550062.

[17] Alexander L. George, 'US–Soviet global rivalry: norms of competition', *Journal of Peace Research* 23: 3, 1986, pp. 247–62, https://doi.org/10.1177/002234338602300304; Alexander L. George, 'Crisis prevention reexam-

However, George also analysed a lower-order means of conflict management, 'similar to keeping a limited war from expanding', as improvising *ad hoc ground rules for escalation control*.[18] This might be done by limiting not only the objectives pursued in a conflict but also the means employed. The means were categorized according to 'weapons, targets, participants, or geographical boundaries'. There could be a quantitative limitation on the number of weapons of a particular type that are employed or a qualitative limitation on the type of weapon. The number and types of targets brought under attack could also be limited. Additionally, the conflict could be limited in terms of the types of personnel involved and the nature of their participation. Finally, combat operations could be confined geographically.[19]

Such ground rules are malleable. Schelling also thought about how to limit risk for great powers at the ground level in the context of what he called a limited war, characterized by threats and coercion. He discussed the tactics of intimidation and threats of enlarging the war, such as threatening to introduce new weapons. But notably he also described a process whereby 'one can gently erode a boundary [of action], easing across it without creating some new challenge or a dramatic bid for enemy reprisal'. This was later referred to as 'salami-slicing'. Schelling described a 'process of military commitment' in the form of 'a series of discrete steps taken deliberately' where possible war between the powers was continually threatened, but the threats would work and this would not lead to war unless one side pushed too far. Yet 'deliberately raising the risk of all-out war is … a tactic that may fit the context of limited war', including 'the threat to introduce new weapons, perhaps nuclear weapons'.[20] This has a very contemporary ring to it.

A difficulty arises, however, for all efforts at informal regulation of conflicts and escalation control, from the very fact that any bargaining involved is tacit, not explicit. It carries inherent risks of misperception and miscalculation by the parties involved. Therefore, diplomatic and other forms of signalling are essential and will include threats as well as potential inducements, but these need to be both comprehensible and credible to the opponent.[21] The western experience of Cold War confrontation with the Soviet Union (USSR) was prone to numerous difficulties in determining and communicating interests through diplomatic and political signalling.[22]

During Russia's war against Ukraine, similar difficulties have beset communications between Russia and western states. New constraints on diplomatic ties since February 2022 have restricted the use of formal diplomatic channels and backchannels, leaving efforts at bargaining to control escalation to rely heavily on more indirect 'discursive signalling'. This is expressed in encoded language, including strategic phraseology, which seeks tacit understandings—or at least reluctant acquiescence—over forms of restraint and which coexists with coercive

ined', in Alexander L. George, ed., *Managing U.S.–Soviet rivalry: problems of crisis prevention* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1983), pp. 365–98 at pp. 376–8.

[18] George, 'Crisis prevention reexamined', p. 389.

[19] George, 'Crisis prevention reexamined', pp. 389–90.

[20] Schelling, *Arms and influence*, pp. 99–100 and 106–7.

[21] See Raymond Cohen, *Theatre of power: the art of diplomatic signalling* (London: Longman, 1987).

[22] George, 'US–Soviet global rivalry', p. 258; Schelling, *The strategy of conflict*, pp. 53–81.

rhetoric. However, the signalling is to some extent tripartite: not just western and Russian, but also Ukrainian, with some further variation between western states.

This article's empirical analysis examines verbal signalling by the major powers and Ukraine, on thresholds of risk, but also measures of restraint, around Russia's war against Ukraine. This forms an interactive, iterative process of messaging between states, to communicate resolve, shape expectations and induce uncertainty in target states, but it also involves efforts to reduce dangerous levels of such uncertainty. Signalling theory has been used widely in crisis bargaining and coercive diplomacy. It can offer insights over managing escalation risks and de-escalating crises and has mostly been part of the logic of game theory.[23] But discursive signalling does not necessitate formal modelling, so can take account of the preferences and beliefs of decision-makers and can also occur among multiple states.[24] When used to convey resolve or threats, it is delivered purposively and instrumentally. In this article, I analyse how it is used to achieve strategic ends, especially around western military assistance to Ukraine. The article now turns to signalling around nuclear weapons, which has framed great power military involvement in the current Russia–Ukraine war.

Nuclear threats and intimidation

Western military assistance for Ukraine's defence has been accompanied by a drumbeat of Russian threats, implied or overt, of the risk of *vertical escalation* up to or beyond the threshold of using nuclear weapons.[25] Two examples are indicative. On launching the full-scale invasion, Putin threatened anyone 'who tries to stand in our way' with Russia's immediate response 'and the consequences will be such as you have never seen in your entire history'.[26] Announcing annexed Ukrainian regions as new 'Russian territory' in September 2022, Putin referred to Russian nuclear prowess and warned that Russia would make use of all weapons systems available 'in the event of a threat to the territorial integrity of our country and to defend Russia and our people'.[27]

Putin has sought especially to intimidate western European states and their publics. After France's President Emmanuel Macron raised the prospect of western

[23] For example, Jeffrey B. Lewis and Kenneth A. Schultz, 'Revealing preferences: empirical estimation of a crisis bargaining game with incomplete information', *Political Analysis* 11: 4, 2003, pp. 345–67, https://doi.org/10.1093/pan/mpg021.

[24] James Igoe Walsh, 'Do states play signaling games?', *Cooperation and Conflict* 42: 4, 2007, pp. 441–59, https://doi.org/10.1177/0010836707082651; Robert F. Trager, 'Diplomatic signaling among multiple states', *The Journal of Politics* 77: 3, 2015, https://doi.org/10.1086/681259.

[25] Center for Strategic & International Studies, 'Nuclear signaling during the war in Ukraine', database, https://nuclearrussiaukraine.csis.org; Liviu Horovitz and Anna Clara Arndt, *One year of nuclear rhetoric and escalation management in Russia's war against Ukraine: an updated chronology*, SWP Working Paper No. 1 (Berlin: German Institute for International and Security Affairs—Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik, 2023), https://swp-berlin.org/publikation/one-year-of-nuclear-rhetoric-and-escalation-management-in-russias-war-against-ukraine-an-updated-chronology.

[26] President of Russia, Vladimir Putin, 'Address by the President of the Russian Federation', 24 Feb. 2022, http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/67843.

[27] President of Russia, Vladimir Putin, 'Address by the President of the Russian Federation', 21 Sept. 2022, http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/69390.

troops in Ukraine, Putin evoked the threat of 'a conflict with the use of nuclear weapons and the destruction of civilisation'.[28] He claimed that Russian tactical nuclear weapons are far more numerous and powerful than western equivalents. In June 2024 he described the Europeans as 'more or less defenceless' in the event of 'some sort of strike', since 'Europe lacks' its own missile attack early warning system. He doubted very much that the United States would get involved if this would result in a strategic nuclear exchange.[29] The frequency and directness of such Russian nuclear threats has been remarkable. In the whole Cold War era it compares only—and only to some extent—with the USSR's threats under the leadership of Nikita Khrushchev more than 60 years previously, though even the latter were less prominent than those displayed in Putin's rhetoric.[30]

Revisions to Russia's nuclear doctrine were also signalled in September 2024. In the revised text of the doctrine a conventional attack on Russia by a non-nuclear nation that is supported by a nuclear power was described as a joint attack on Russia, permitting a nuclear response. Purposeful ambiguity over the definition of a 'joint' attack was another warning to the US and other supporters of Ukraine.[31] However, most likely such declaratory policy was intended to dissuade western states from building up Ukrainian missile stockpiles, rather than to define a nuclear threshold. Like other nuclear powers, Russia would wish to retain the option of nuclear escalation rather than commit itself in advance in a public document over such a monumental state decision.[32]

Russian nuclear signalling was not only verbal. A matter of months after deploying tactical nuclear forces in Belarus in 2023, Russia held exercises of these weapons, involving dual-capable Iskander and Kinzhal missiles, in its Southern Military District. (This both borders and includes parts of Ukraine that Russia has annexed.) In June 2024, for the first time, Belarusian forces and Russian nuclear support units conducted joint exercises of non-strategic nuclear forces. A second phase of these exercises was conducted two months later, in August. For a prominent Russian specialist, these acts were warning signals, raising the stakes in a proxy conflict with the West.[33]

Real actions which reduce physical control over potential escalation are important for Schelling's conceptualization of the manipulation of risk. These include removing warheads from storage and pairing them with delivery vehicles for a tactical strike. But so far Russia has been cautious in this respect and has

[28] Pjotr Sauer, 'Sending troops to Ukraine would risk provoking nuclear war, Putin tells Nato', *Guardian*, 29 Feb. 2024, https://www.theguardian.com/world/2024/feb/29/troops-ukraine-risk-provoking-nuclear-war-vladimir-putin-tells-nato.

[29] President of Russia, 'Plenary session of the St. Petersburg International Economic Forum', 7 June 2024, http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/74234.

[30] Adomeit, *Soviet crisis prevention and management*, pp. 55–9.

[31] Putin summarized the key changes to the doctrine at a meeting of the Security Council: see President of Russia, 'Meeting of the Security Council standing conference on nuclear deterrence', 25 Sept. 2024, http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/75182.

[32] Jyri Lavikainen, *Russia's new nuclear doctrine: yet another attempt to pressure Ukraine's supporters*, FIIA Comment (Helsinki: Finnish Institute of International Affairs, 2024), https://fiia.fi/en/publication/russias-new-nuclear-doctrine.

[33] Dmitry Trenin, cited in Alexander Taranov, 'Russia and Belarus hold joint nuclear non-strategic nuclear exercises (part three)', *Eurasia Daily Monitor* 21: 124, 2024.

not presented evidence of actual willingness to use nuclear weapons, while the mercurial president of Belarus, Aliaksandr Lukashenka, has no control over the nuclear weapons deployed on Belarusian territory. No clear evidence has surfaced of Russian-devolved authorization to local commanders to use nuclear arms. However, leaked secret Russian files drawn up between 2008 and 2014 for war-gaming and presentations for naval officers suggested that the operational threshold for the use of tactical nuclear weapons was already quite low at that time. The Russian military could potentially use such weapons for purposes such as 'containing states from using aggression … or escalating military conflicts'.[34] This implies some risk of loss of control by the regime. But despite such war-gaming, it is highly likely that actual Russian nuclear use remains a top-level political decision.

Western states have had to judge the purposes of Russia's rhetoric of nuclear intimidation, which has tended to be abstract about scenarios. Uncertainty is intended to intimidate.[35] The risk of conflict arising from such strategic ambiguity is enhanced by the dual capability of new Russian weapons systems and the risk calculus has to consider possible inadvertent escalation. Dmitry Medvedev, a senior figure in the Russian regime, signalled in 2024 that 'The accidental, unintentional start of a nuclear conflict cannot be discounted, which is why all these games around Ukraine are extremely dangerous'.[36] This might be read as nuclear intimidation, not cautionary advice. Yet Russia's recognition of potential miscalculation of adversary intent or technologically driven escalation is reflected in its retention of emergency hotlines with the US (between leaders and between the Russian Ministry of Defence and the Pentagon) and with NATO, dating from the Cold War (now as secure computer communications systems), as well as sporadic direct conversations of US and Russian defence and intelligence chiefs during 2022–2024, to deflate crises as nuclear risks rose.[37]

Some western specialists have speculated whether Russia has shifted to a strategy of 'escalate to de-escalate'. This implies the use of nuclear weapons, perhaps tactical low-yield weapons, to 'defuse' a crisis or perhaps an unfavourable situation on the ground in conventional warfare and force an enemy to capitulate.[38] One

[34] Max Seddon and Chris Cook, 'Leaked Russian military files reveal criteria for nuclear strike', *Financial Times*, 28 Feb. 2024, https://www.ft.com/content/f18e6e1f-5c3d-4554-aee5-50a730b306b7; 'Risk of Russian tactical nuclear strike higher than thought, *FT* claims', *RT*, 29 Feb. 2024.

[35] For a discussion of this effort, see Aleksandr Golts, *The ladder of nuclear escalation*, SCEEUS Report no. 9 (Stockholm: Stockholm Centre for Eastern European Studies, 2024), https://sceeus.se/en/publications/the-ladder-of-nuclear-escalation.

[36] 'Bolshoe intervyu Dmitriya Medvedeva rossiyskim smi' [The big interview of Dmitri Medvedev to the Russian media', United Russia, 22 Feb. 2024, https://moscow.er.ru/activity/news/bolshoe-intervyu-dmitriya-medvedeva-rossijskim-smi.

[37] Guy Faulconbridge and Lidia Kelly, 'Russia says emergency hotlines with US and NATO remain as nuclear risks rise', Reuters, 8 Oct. 2024, https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/russia-says-emergency-hotlines-with-us-nato-remain-nuclear-risks-rise-2024-10-08; Alexey Uvarov, 'The art of containing escalation', *Riddle*, 18 March 2024, https://ridl.io/the-art-of-containing-escalation.

[38] Polina Sinovets, *Escalation for de-escalation? Hazy nuclear-weapon 'red lines' generate Russian advantages*, PONARS Eurasia Policy Memo no. 605, 2018, https://ponarseurasia.org/wp-content/uploads/attachments/Pepm605_Sinovets_August2019_0.pdf; Rose McDermott, Reid Pauly and Paul Slovic, 'Putin and the psychology of nuclear brinkmanship', *Foreign Affairs*, 30 May 2023, https://www.foreignaffairs.com/ukraine/putin-and-psychology-nuclear-brinkmanship.

suggested trigger for Russian nuclear use, for example, was its potential loss of Crimea. Assessing potential scenarios, however, others have questioned whether there could be any strategic value for Russia in resorting to such weapons.[39]

We cannot tell how far Putin shares this instrumental view of escalation. However, his public position, when asked if he had thought about the use of tactical nuclear weapons in a specific military context—such as when Russia was compelled to withdraw from the Kharkiv region and the city of Kherson in 2022—has been to deny this.[40] Also, in mid-2024, pressed by the Russian nuclear hawk Sergey Karaganov to stop the war through 'rapid movement along the ladder of nuclear escalation', Putin reaffirmed the known 'exceptional cases' for nuclear use in Russian nuclear doctrine. He specified that 'I don't think that such a case has arisen—there is no such need'.[41]

Ambiguity in Russian signalling is necessarily influenced by counter-signals from the United States. These have been less overtly threatening, but likewise leave the 'chance' of dangerous confrontational escalation and so interact dynamically with Russian nuclear rhetoric. On the eve of Russia's offensive against Ukraine in February 2022, President Joe Biden drew a line in the sand by emphasizing that the US would not support Ukraine with military forces, to avoid potential nuclear war with Russia. Yet in response to Putin's language of nuclear coercion later that year in September, Biden publicly warned of a 'consequential' US response to any nuclear escalation. Top US officials talked of the 'catastrophic', 'severe', 'strong', 'profound' consequences that the US and its allies would impose on Russia were it to ignore such warnings.[42] Such warnings, as a form of intra-war deterrence, were also delivered directly and privately at the highest levels. Even if what was implied, or even stated, was a severe *conventional* military response to any Russian use of a tactical nuclear weapon, this still leaves the serious chance of further vertical escalation.

[39] For example, Lawrence Freedman, 'Escalation, red lines, risk and the Russo-Ukraine war', Alexander Dallin Memorial Lecture delivered to the Center for Russian, East European & Eurasian Studies, Stanford University, 18 April 2024, https://samf.substack.com/p/escalation-red-lines-risk-and-the-russo-ukraine-war.

[40] President of Russia, 'Interview to Dmitry Kiselev', 13 Mar. 2024, http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/73648.

[41] President of Russia, 'Plenary session of the St. Petersburg International Economic Forum'. Karaganov's call in this panel session for Putin to be ready to use nuclear weapons and to change Russian nuclear doctrine to provide the right to respond to any attacks on Russian territory with a nuclear strike is not typical but also not exceptional among Russian civilian specialists. For example, Dmitri Trenin has called for Russia to lower the threshold for the use of nuclear weapons to allow their use against a 'threat to the vital interests of the country', arguing that Russia's adversaries 'must realise that it is impossible to win a conventional war involving the vital interests of a power armed with the bomb'; Dmitri Trenin, 'Here's how Russia can prevent WW3', Russian International Affairs Council, 11 June 2024, https://russiancouncil.ru/en/analytics-and-comments/comments/here-s-how-russia-can-prevent-ww3/. Such discourse does not voice official Russian state policy but may contribute to the Russian state's effort at nuclear intimidation, expressing lower-level signalling. There is no agreed Russian ladder of nuclear escalation; for recent civilian and military categorizations, see Timothy Thomas, 'Escalation ladders in Russian nuclear strategy: what rung are we on?', Saratoga Foundation, 3 March 2025, https://www.saratoga-foundation.org/p/escalation-ladders-in-russian-nuclear.

[42] For example, US National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan. See 'Full transcript of "Face the Nation" on Sept. 25 2022', CBS News, 25 Sept. 2022, https://www.cbsnews.com/news/face-the-nation-full-transcript-09-25-2022. See also David E. Sanger and Jim Tankersley, 'U.S warns Russia of "catastrophic consequences" if it uses nuclear weapons', *New York Times*, 25 Sept. 2022, https://www.nytimes.com/2022/09/25/us/politics/us-russia-nuclear.html.

Indeed, Russian use of even a low-yield tactical or battlefield nuclear weapon in Ukraine in practice may well not 'de-escalate' to the Russian advantage. Instead, the 'basic rule of prudence' could be cast aside. In May 2024 Polish foreign minister Radosław (Radek) Sikorski claimed that 'the Americans have told the Russians that if you explode a nuke, even if it does not kill anybody, we will hit all your targets (positions) in Ukraine with conventional weapons, we'll destroy all of them'.[43] This could be rather blunt, if indirect, signalling—or alternatively a bluff. However, since such a national US response against Russian forces would not be a NATO Article 5 scenario, it is arguably the more credible for not depending on a NATO consensus.

Finally, one should consider an important constraint on Russian efforts to manipulate uncertainty around nuclear weapons that had little influence in Schelling's dyadic perception of nuclear risk taking in the bipolar world—the perspectives of the Chinese and, to a lesser extent, Indian leaderships. China has promoted a treaty prohibiting the first use of nuclear weapons (seemingly at odds with Russian revised nuclear doctrine), views no nuclear use as a condition of working towards a settlement of the war and has denounced the use of, or threats to use, nuclear weapons. Both Xi Jinping and Narendra Modi, with their rivalries with nuclear-armed states, see no advantage in lowering the threshold for nuclear use, nor, in a world in which they remain lesser nuclear powers, do they see any benefit from nuclear coercion becoming more acceptable.[44]

Western military assistance to Ukraine and tacit ground rules to restrain escalation

Our theoretical expectation from the experience of the Cold War is that escalation risk management requires efforts to reduce uncertainty, through measures of restraint, alongside the nuclear signalling and nuclear threats discussed above. Indeed, in keeping with George's conceptual framing, between 2022 and 2025 Putin and western leaders alike have taken seriously the 'basic rule of prudence' against a clash between their respective military personnel. A 'deconfliction' line was established between the Russian and US militaries after the invasion commenced, to reduce escalatory risk of a great power war. In May 2022 President Biden signalled explicitly that 'so long as the United States or our allies are not attacked, we will not be directly engaged in this conflict, either by sending American troops to fight in Ukraine or by attacking Russian forces'.[45] This established a critical baseline threshold for US military involvement, with much looser restraints on other forms of assistance around Russia's war with Ukraine.

[43] Nate Ostiller, 'Polish FM says US will strike Russian troops in Ukraine if Russia uses nuclear weapons', *Kyiv Independent*, 25 May 2024, https://kyivindependent.com/polish-fm-says-us-will-strike-russian-troops-in-ukraine-if-russia-uses-nuclear-weapons.

[44] See Arndt, Horovitz and Onderco, 'Russia's failed nuclear coercion against Ukraine', pp. 176–7.

[45] Joseph R. Biden, Jr, 'What America will and will not do in Ukraine', *New York Times*, 31 May 2022, https://www.nytimes.com/2022/05/31/opinion/biden-ukraine-strategy.html.

There is no evidence, however, that broader rules of prudence—patterns of informal normative constraint, as conceptualized by George—developed between major powers around Russia's war against Ukraine between 2022 and 2025. Yet, despite Russian efforts at nuclear intimidation, western states gradually increased their military support to Ukraine between 2022 and 2024. This process was accompanied by the adoption of lower-level restraints, calibrated to mitigate escalatory risks (too loose and contested to constitute norms), which can be categorized insightfully according to George's typology of tacit ad hoc ground rules. They operated asymmetrically, since Russian reciprocal restraint was limited to stepping back from critical escalatory acts—the use of nuclear weapons and the overt use of other weapons of mass destruction, as well as attacks on NATO assets or territory. In this section, I analyse the evidence for such ground rules.

We should clarify that this is not an exercise in determining certain Russian 'red lines'. Russia played up the risks of most types of western military aid to Ukraine by referring to such red lines, as supposed thresholds for escalation. The intention was not to clarify or delineate specific strategic interests, but to intimidate and incite hesitation in other states, out of fear of acting against Russian core interests. Putin expressed this discursive function in an open-ended threat in 2021: 'I hope that no one will think about crossing the "red line" with regard to Russia. We ourselves will determine in each specific case where it will be drawn.'[46] This allows Putin equally to escalate up or down. Gould-Davies argues that Russia's red lines, as for other states, are 'nearly always soft, variable and contingent'. So a preoccupation with red lines invites deception, as 'a state will seek to manipulate an adversary's desire to restrain itself by enlarging the range of interests it claims are fundamental and actions it considers unacceptable'.[47] Next, I turn to signalling over ground rules which often occurred at the expense of Putin's supposed red lines.

The quality of weapons systems provided to Ukraine has occupied much diplomatic attention. Russian responses have reflected a longstanding anxiety about western military technological prowess and whether Russia is lagging behind advances in western military technology, especially with respect to high-precision weapons since the 1991 Gulf War.[48] Indeed, from an early stage of its campaign in Ukraine, Russia's escalation rhetoric focused less on armour (such as modern western tanks, provided in relatively small numbers) than on long-range systems capable of deep strikes behind Russian lines in occupied Ukraine or into Russian territory.

Before 2024, however, Putin's threatened escalatory response over this differed little from Russia's continued open-ended military goals in Ukraine: 'the longer the range of the Western systems that will be supplied to Ukraine, the further we will have to move the threat away from our borders'.[49] This failed to deter the

[46] President of Russia, Vladimir Putin, 'Presidential address to the Federal Assembly', 21 April 2021, http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/65418.

[47] Nigel Gould-Davies, 'Putin has no red lines', *New York Times*, 1 Jan. 2023, https://www.nytimes.com/2023/01/01/opinion/putin-russia-ukraine-war-strategy.html.

[48] Tracey German, *Russia and the changing character of conflict* (Amherst, NY: Cambria Press, 2023), pp. 124–39.

[49] President of Russia, Vladimir Putin, 'Presidential address to Federal Assembly', 21 Feb. 2023, http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/70565.

United Kingdom from providing Storm Shadow long-range cruise missiles to Ukraine in May 2023. France leaned towards the UK position, whereas Germany, under Chancellor Olaf Scholz, consistently blocked the delivery of its longer-range 500-km precision Taurus cruise missiles to Ukraine.

In the US, the Biden administration signalled from the outset of the war a deliberately cautious and incremental approach over weapons systems, which came to be reflected in a dominant western and NATO policy of ad hoc adjustment of thresholds of self-restraint in the provision of weapons. Putin's list of demands for NATO before he invaded Ukraine had included the non-deployment of land-based missiles in areas 'allowing them to reach the territory' of Russia. Perhaps with this in mind, President Biden insisted throughout 2022 and 2023 that 'we're not going to send to Ukraine rocket systems that strike into Russia'.[50] His anxiety seemed to be that if Ukraine regularly shelled Crimea or Russian territory with US-made weapons, such as the American-made Army Tactical Missile System (ATACMS), Russia could respond as if NATO were attacking the homeland.[51] The US accepted Ukraine using longer-range version of ATACMS against Crimea only in early 2024 and against Russia itself in late 2024.[52]

For US officials, the choice of weapons systems to provide to Ukraine appears to have involved an assessment of four factors: 'Do they need it? Can they use it? Do we have it? What is the Russian response going to be?'. Russia's reluctance to retaliate was factored into the US risk calculus: 'We did this—there was no escalation or response—can we do the next thing?'.[53] Until a change of heart in June 2023, the US was especially cautious over the delivery of F-16 fighter jets to Ukraine, given their capabilities (which included the potential to deliver long-range cruise missiles if Ukraine were to receive these).[54] In contrast, given Russia's devastating use of its air force in Ukraine, many European NATO states argued from an early stage of the war that no bar should be set against the delivery of such planes, despite Russia branding this step as 'an unacceptable escalation'.[55] This contrasted with Russia's willingness to deploy all manner of military systems and arms in Ukraine. After Ukraine commenced deeper strikes into Russia with western missiles, Russia even blurred its nuclear rhetoric with a gesture of conventional escalatory dominance in November 2024. It used a conventional warhead

[50] Steve Holland, 'U.S. will not send Ukraine rocket systems that can reach Russia, says Biden', Reuters, 30 May 2022, https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/us-will-not-send-ukraine-rocket-systems-that-can-reach-russia-says-biden-2022-05-30.

[51] Max Boot, 'Ukraine is crossing Russia's "red lines" with impunity. It's a lesson for Biden.', *Washington Post*, 28 Aug. 2023, https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2023/08/28/ukraine-russia-red-lines-putin-biden.

[52] Vladimir Isachenkov, 'Russia warns US off sending long-range weapons to Ukraine', AP News, 2 Sept. 2022, https://apnews.com/article/russia-ukraine-nuclear-weapons-government-and-politics-c43d68369418ed2507f5432074d89932; Kathryn Armstrong, 'Ukraine war: Kyiv uses longer-range US missiles for first time', BBC News, 24 April 2024, https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-68893196.amp.

[53] As explained anonymously by US officials. John Hudson and Dan Lamothe, 'Biden shows growing appetite to cross Putin's red lines', *Washington Post*, 1 June 2023, https://www.washingtonpost.com/national-security/2023/06/01/ukraine-f-16s-biden-russia-escalation.

[54] For the considerable increase in military capability the F-16 offers Ukraine, see retired Air Force General Philip M. Breedlove, in Max Boot, 'Ukraine is crossing Russia's red lines with impunity. It's a lesson for Biden', *Washington Post*, 28 Aug. 2023, https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2023/08/28/ukraine-russia-red-lines-putin-biden.

[55] Sergei Lavrov, 'Moscow warns West against "playing with fire"', *RT*, 28 May 2023.

on an experimental nuclear-capable ballistic missile, the Oreshnik, to strike the Ukrainian city of Dnipro.[56]

Military targets have been at the core of western calculations over the risk of deploying highly developed military systems in Ukraine. Early in the war the US hesitated with respect to the use of western weapons against targets in Crimea, but later clarified that it placed no limitations on Ukraine being able to strike any military targets on its territory with US systems within its internationally recognized borders, with Crimea being viewed as part of Ukraine. However, the US would not permit Ukraine to attack Russia with such systems until November 2024.

Ukraine was obliged to endorse this prohibition. Worried about perceptions of escalation risk in the US Congress (which was stalling approval of crucial military funding for Ukraine) in February 2024, Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky conceded: 'Ukraine does not have the opportunity, does not have the right and will never use its partners' weapons in territories other than Ukrainian temporarily occupied territory'.[57] This implied, for example, that Russian aircraft shot down by Ukraine over Russia itself were downed by Ukraine's domestic weapons. Ukraine has had the legal right to strike legitimate Russian military targets outside Ukraine in self-defence. Yet then-NATO Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg only explicitly confirmed this right two years into the war (even though NATO, as an alliance, had only provided non-lethal aid to Ukraine, with each ally able to decide on caveats on what they deliver to Ukraine).[58] Even then, the US remained concerned over Ukraine's developing campaign using its own long-range drones to attack targets in Russia, especially energy infrastructure (despite Russian destruction of much of Ukraine's energy facilities).

The US only reconsidered its restraints on the use of American weapons for Ukrainian strikes in Russia, though not longer-range strikes, when Russia stepped up attacks from its territory against the Kharkiv region.[59] After Ukraine used US-supplied HIMARS (High Mobility Artillery Rocket System) missiles to destroy air defences just inside Russia, the Putin regime still hoped to limit the permitted scope of such strikes by threatening America with 'fatal consequences'.[60] Russia claimed that long-range precision strikes into its territory required space reconnaissance assets; it claimed that Ukraine does not possess these, but

[56] Ben Hall, 'Vladimir Putin climbs escalatory ladder with missile experiment', *Financial Times*, 22 Nov. 2024, https://www.ft.com/content/0c5d6307-8cf5-409a-bd25-19ad1b27778d. The US was pre-notified of this strike through nuclear risk-reduction channels.

[57] Kateryna Tyshchenko, 'Zelensky: Ukraina budet primenyat' oruzhie partnerov tol'ko na okkupirovannykh territoriyakh' [Zelensky: Ukraine will use partners' weapons only in occupied territories], *Ukrainska Pravda*, 24 Feb. 2024, https://www.pravda.com.ua/rus/news/2024/02/24/7443539.

[58] Henry Foye, 'Kyiv has right to strike Russian targets "outside Ukraine" says NATO chief', *Financial Times*, 22 Feb. 2024, https://www.ft.com/content/175bd28f-1eb8-4f57-9cf4-110cca055747.

[59] David E. Sanger, 'Inside the White House, a debate over letting Ukraine shoot U.S. weapons into Russia', *New York Times*, 22 May 2024, https://www.nytimes.com/2024/05/22/us/politics/white-house-ukraine-weapons-russia.html.

[60] Ukrainian foreign minister Dmytro Kuleba noted that Kyiv was pressing its allies to expand the scope of application of the 'clearance' to make such strikes as 'it comes with some rules that need to be followed': 'Himars strike destroys air defences inside Russia as Kremlin warns of "fatal consequences"', *Telegraph*, 3 June 2024, https://www.telegraph.co.uk/world-news/2024/06/03/ukraine-russia-war-latest-news7.

the US does, and the targeting is done by western specialists, without Ukrainian participation.[61] Putin threatened the countries supplying weapons for Ukrainian attacks against Russian territory in a new way, asking: 'Why don't we have the right to supply weapons of the same class to regions of the world where there will be strikes on sensitive facilities of those countries?'.[62] Yet quite apart from its escalatory risk, the demands on Russian weapons stockpiles (Russia has even turned to Iran for the supply of ballistic missiles for use against Ukraine[63]) would make it difficult to realize this inflammatory option.

In the case of the UK, Russia sought to intimidate with the (legally distorted) claim that strikes in Russia by Ukraine using British weapons entitled Russia to retaliate by striking back at British military targets both inside and outside Ukraine.[64] In response, Britain reaffirmed its view that Ukraine's use of the British Storm Shadow missiles, which would not involve the UK in attacks, was only for defensive purposes. Such action would not preclude hitting targets in Russia, 'within the parameters and bounds of international humanitarian law', though deep strikes against undisputed Russian territory were not approved at this time.[65]

A particular American escalatory concern has been Ukraine's readiness to strike elements of Russia's wider strategic nuclear infrastructure. In May 2024 Ukrainian drones attacked two Russian early warning radar stations, which form part of the nuclear missile launch warning system.[66] This could be interpreted as crossing a threshold and justifying nuclear retaliation, according to the letter of Russian nuclear doctrine. The US took care to stress that the drones involved were produced inside Ukraine. A Russian report quoted an American official's assertion that 'Russia could perceive its deterrent capabilities being targeted' and that 'these sites have not been involved in supporting Russia's war against Ukraine'.[67] In contrast, when Ukraine destroyed numerous Russian strategic bombers in June 2025 in a spectacular demonstration of its drone capabilities, Kyiv could point out that these aircraft had been used to launch long-range missiles at Ukrainian targets, although such degradation of Russia's nuclear deterrent inflicted by a non-nuclear state is unprecedented.[68]

The Kerch Strait Bridge (Crimean Bridge) has been an especially contentious Ukrainian target, since in addition to its strategic significance its construction was

[61] 'Putin warns West about consequences of long-range strikes on Russia', *RT*, 28 May 2024.

[62] George Wright, 'Putin warns Russia could provide weapons to strike West', BBC News, 6 June 2024, https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/cn44r9zjnpjo.

[63] Christopher Miller, 'Iran ships "hundreds" of ballistic missiles to Russia', *Financial Times*, 8 Sept. 2024, https://www.ft.com/content/135732cf-d5b8-4bbe-930d-8b55236f4894.

[64] Guy Faulconbridge and Muvija M, 'Russia warns Britain it could strike back after Cameron remark on Ukraine', Reuters, 6 May 2024, https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/russia-warns-it-can-strike-british-military-targets-after-cameron-remarks-2024-05-06.

[65] Kiran Stacey, 'UK will not help Ukraine hit targets in Russia, defence secretary says', *Guardian*, 19 July 2024, https://www.theguardian.com/politics/article/2024/jul/19/uk-will-not-help-ukraine-hit-targets-in-russia-defence-secretary-says.

[66] 'Ukraine strikes Russian early-warning system in Orenburg', *Moscow Times*, 27 May 2024, https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2024/05/27/ukraine-strikes-russian-early-warning-system-in-orenburg-report-a85228.

[67] 'US heeded Moscow's de-escalatory message—Russian deputy FM', *RT*, 5 Aug. 2024.

[68] Paul Sonne, 'Aiming to change Putin's calculus, Ukraine exposes Russia's vulnerability', *New York Times*, 3 June 2025, https://www.nytimes.com/2025/06/03/world/europe/russia-ukraine-drone-attack-putin-war.html.

such a personal project for Putin. He viewed it as symbolizing the 'reunification' of Crimea with the Russian mainland.[69] Ukraine has insisted it is a key, legitimate target, but Russia has done its best to foster western nervousness about supporting Ukraine's goal to destroy the bridge. For example, Russia tried to intimidate Germany to avert the delivery of Taurus missiles to Ukraine, which Ukraine sought to strike the bridge among other targets. Moscow made the false claim that if supplying Ukraine with such missiles that can strike Russian territory was said to conform with international law, then 'strikes on German factories where these missiles are made would also be in full compliance with international law'.[70]

The question of any *participation of military personnel* in Ukraine has been acutely contentious. Russia has recruited nationals of various foreign countries into its forces fighting in Ukraine, effectively as mercenaries. Ukraine has done likewise, on a much smaller scale. Such recruitment on either side does not directly implicate foreign states. However, the presence of western military trainers in Ukraine is more significant. In March 2023, after Chancellor Scholz implied British military personnel were in Ukraine operating Storm Shadow cruise missiles, Medvedev declared them 'a legal target for our armed forces … not as mercenaries, but namely as British NATO specialists'. This language appeared intended to deter the wider deployment of the military instructors of NATO states in Ukraine—an option floated in October 2023 by British defence minister Grant Shapps.[71] Some months later Medvedev tried to raise the stakes by warning Britain that 'deploying an official military contingent to Ukraine would be a declaration of war against our country'.[72] This failed to dissuade President Macron from raising the bar and arguing in February 2024 that the option of deploying western troops on the ground in Ukraine could not be ruled out, although he noted that officially 'there's no consensus today' on the matter.[73] French officials—although not Macron directly—elaborated that this was not about sending troops en masse, but rather about discussing NATO deployments to assist with roles such as demining, cyber operations or weapons production. Discussing the option was intended to support deterrence, which required strategic ambiguity.[74]

[69] Aleksandra Simonova, 'The Crimean bridge as a symbolic and military object in contemporary Russia', Jordan Center, 3 Dec. 2024, https://jordanrussiacenter.org/blog/the-crimean-bridge-between-symbolic-and-military-foundations-of-russia.

[70] 'Russia could target any British soldiers training troops in Ukraine, Medvedev says', Reuters, 1 Oct. 2023, https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/russias-medvedev-says-british-training-troops-ukraine-could-be-legitimate-2023-10-01.

[71] 'Russia could target any British soldiers training troops in Ukraine'.

[72] 'Russia's Medvedev says any UK troop deployment to Ukraine would be a declaration of war', Reuters, 12 Jan. 2024, https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/russias-medvedev-says-any-uk-troop-deployment-ukraine-would-be-declaration-war-2024-01-12.

[73] 'Sending troops to Ukraine: a necessary but badly presented debate', *Le Monde*, 19 Feb. 2024, https://www.lemonde.fr/en/opinion/article/2024/02/29/sending-troops-to-ukraine-a-necessary-but-badly-presented-debate_6571963_23.html; Yohannes Lowe, 'Russia–Ukraine war: Kremlin warns of conflict with NATO if alliance troops fight in Ukraine—as it happened', *Guardian*, 27 Feb. 2024, https://www.theguardian.com/world/live/2024/feb/27/russia-ukraine-war-live-france-macron-ground-troops-latest-news; David Chazan, 'Macron's warmongering makes battle "inevitable"', *Guardian*, 27 Feb. 2024.

[74] Guy Chazan and Henry Foy, 'Germany rebuffs Emmanuel Macron in troops for Ukraine and tells Paris to "supply more weapons"', *Financial Times*, 27 Feb. 2024, https://www.ft.com/content/10df6f24-7ce6-407f-8509-76c65ec6e740.

From a barrage of diplomatic signalling, however, it became clear that introducing ambiguity over such a critical step went too far for other major NATO allies. Secretary-General Stoltenberg confirmed in March 2024 that there were no plans for NATO combat troops on the ground in Ukraine. He pointed out that if individual NATO countries sent troops to Ukraine, that would affect the alliance as a whole, as a collective defence pact, so a common approach is important.[75] Chancellor Scholz quickly ruled out the possibility of European countries or NATO states sending any ground troops to Ukrainian territory.[76] Heavyweight allies, such as the UK and Poland, also ruled out plans to deploy troops in Ukraine. The US itself opposed the notion of deploying even American trainers on the ground in Ukraine. The concern, as expressed by Victoria Nuland, a former senior State Department official, was 'that NATO training bases inside Ukraine will become a target for Vladimir Putin', with the potential to 'escalate the war in a different direction and cause Putin to think that NATO territory might be fair game for him'.[77]

Nevertheless, Macron's *démarche* prompted a discussion. The prime minister of Slovakia, Robert Fico, claimed in early 2024 that some countries, though not his own, were weighing whether to strike bilateral deals to provide troops to help Ukraine fend off the Russian invasion.[78] Lithuanian President Gitanas Nausėda felt that 'sending missions to Ukraine' should be discussed. He accepted Macron's essential point that by drawing red lines the West was helping Putin, 'who is beginning to think that we are predictable and that he can control and manipulate us'.[79] Still, nearly all western leaders seemed loath to link the issue of western resolve over Ukraine to a potential ground deployment in the country.

Russia's initial response, through Putin's spokesman Dmitry Peskov, rhetorically raised the stakes. He asserted that with this 'very important new element … we would need to talk not about the probability but the inevitability (of war)'—by implication, with NATO.[80] Putin himself first spoke the language of nuclear conflict, but a few weeks later, after western leaders distanced themselves from

[75] Yohannes Lowe and Sammy Gecsoyler, 'Russia–Ukraine war: Nato chief confirms there are no plans to send alliance troops to Ukraine—as it happened', *Guardian*, 11 March 2024, https://www.theguardian.com/world/live/2024/mar/11/russia-ukraine-war-live-volodymyr-zelenskiy-pope-francis-latest-news-updates. UK foreign minister David Cameron similarly drew a distinction between a NATO mission 'for Ukraine' as opposed to 'in Ukraine', ruling out western 'boots on the ground' in Ukraine: see Jennifer McKiernan, 'Lord Cameron rules out western boots on the ground in Ukraine', BBC News, 4 April 2024, https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-politics-68730246.

[76] Andreas Rinke and Matthias Williams, 'Germany's Scholz rules out western ground troops for Ukraine', Reuters, 27 Feb. 2024, https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/germanys-scholz-rules-out-western-ground-troops-ukraine-2024-02-07.

[77] Victoria Nuland interviewed by Martha Raddatz, ABC News, '"This Week" transcript 5-19-24: Sen. Chris Van Hollen & Victoria Nuland', 19 May 2024, https://abcnews.go.com/Politics/week-transcript-5-19-24-sen-chris-van/story?id=110365911.

[78] Lorne Cook and Karel Janicek, 'Germany and Poland say they're not sending troops to Ukraine as the Kremlin warns of a wider war', AP, 28 Feb. 2024, https://apnews.com/article/nato-stoltenberg-ukraine-troops-france-slovakia-5d4ed747861a3c0edb8f922fa36427c2. On options, including the deployment of national contingents of willing states, see Michael Benhamou, Gary Deakin and Juha Vauhkonen, 'Opinion: should Europe send troops to Ukraine?', *Kyiv Post*, 22 April 2024, https://www.kyivpost.com/opinion/31291.

[79] 'Enough of red lines—Lithuanian President on foreign troops in Ukraine', *Ukrainian Pravda*, 13 March 2024, https://www.pravda.com.ua/eng/news/2024/03/13/7446327.

[80] Lowe, 'Russia–Ukraine war'.

Macron's stance, he moderated his rhetoric. He noted dismissively that 'official military contingents of foreign states' in Ukraine 'will not change the situation on the battlefield'. Putin seemed to focus on the US position. Asked about escalation, if 'a collision is inevitable', he referred to the Biden administration's announcement that it would not send troops to Ukraine. He noted that 'they have enough specialists in Russian-American relations and strategic deterrence', an allusion to the American understanding of deterrence logic, 'therefore, I do not think it is getting closer to a head-on collision'.[81]

The geographic boundaries of combat operations, both in relation to objectives and the means employed, represent the last important dimension of escalation control in George's typology. Obviously, Russian action in NATO territory was a fundamental threshold. With this in mind, western powers were reluctant initially to encourage Ukrainian strikes against Crimea using western systems. When Ukraine planned offensive operations in early 2023, US officials insinuated that a major campaign to take Crimea would be too dangerous. US Secretary of State Antony Blinken reportedly told experts that an operation for Crimea would be a 'red line' for Russia. This influenced American initial reluctance to offer Ukraine ATACMS missiles, as Ukraine was unlikely to accept a condition that they not be used to hit the peninsula.[82]

This caution began to dissipate as Russia absorbed more Ukrainian attacks, not just on Crimea—forcing the retreat of the Russian navy from the peninsula—but on unquestionably Russian territory, even far from the military front lines. Western acceptance of such operations by Ukraine was made easier by Russia's large-scale targeting of Ukrainian energy and economic infrastructure and other civilian sites, which means that the legal requirement for Ukraine to exercise its right of self-defence 'proportionately' has not been remotely in question. Indeed, from the outset of its full-scale invasion, Russia has sought to strike the whole depth of the territory of Ukraine, with nearly all weapons systems at its disposal.

In any case, Russia had undermined any implied claim that strikes against 'Russia' proper crossed a new escalatory threshold by claiming Crimea and other annexed regions to be part of Russia. By 2024 Ukraine had routinely used western weapons throughout the occupied regions, with these attacks being increasingly followed by strikes by Ukrainian drones deep into Russian territory. But restraints remained. Ukraine still sought, but failed to obtain, US agreement to use its ATACMS missiles, which have a range of 300 kilometres, to strike airfields deep inside Russia, especially to counter Russia's use of glide bombs.

Western self-restraint on this issue weakened after Ukraine's launch of a surprise land incursion a short distance into Russia's Kursk region in August 2024, using western-supplied armour, artillery and air defence systems. NATO states chose to accept this use of their weaponry and described this move, which they were not

[81] President of Russia, 'Interview to Dmitry Kiselev'.

[82] Daniel Block, 'The Russian red line Washington won't cross—yet', *The Atlantic*, 26 May 2023, https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2023/05/ukraine-us-long-range-missiles-crimea-war-end/674199; Casey Michael, 'Russia's Crimean red line has been erased', *Foreign Policy*, 4 Oct. 2023, https://foreignpolicy.com/2023/10/04/crimea-russia-ukraine-red-line.

informed of in advance, as a risky military venture, justified in the context of an overall defensive campaign, rather than an escalation.[83] The UK even reaffirmed explicitly that its donated weapons, apart initially from Storm Shadow missiles, could be used in such an operation to support Ukraine's right of self-defence.[84] Ukraine's foray into Kursk was a significant occupation of Russian legal territory. Yet Putin refrained from ratcheting up his nuclear threats and simply announced an 'anti-terrorist' operation in response to this setback. This encouraged President Zelensky to argue that 'the whole naïve, illusory concept of so-called red lines regarding Russia' had 'crumbled'. He appealed to his western backers that there was 'no single rational reason to deny us true power, true long-range capabilities'.[85]

In October 2024 the US finally eased its prohibition against deeper strikes with ATACMs at a dramatic inflection point: Russia's surprise deployment of thousands of North Korean regular troops and special forces into the war to fight alongside Russia, initially in the Kursk region. The large-scale integration of foreign forces into Russia's ground force operations was clearly a major escalation. Even Chinese president Xi Jinping declared at this point the need to adhere to the principles of 'no spillover from the battlefield, no escalation of fighting and no adding oil to the fire by relevant parties'.[86] Ukraine was now permitted and proceeded to extend strikes with US and other western missiles further into Russia.[87]

This seemed to lift one of the clearest tacit western ground rules of escalation control. The previous month Putin had escalated his rhetoric by claiming that through this action NATO countries would be 'at war with Russia' and 'NATO would become a direct party in a war against a nuclear power', it would 'clearly change the very essence, the very nature of the conflict dramatically'.[88] In a demonstrative response, Russia then staged a strike on Ukraine with the Oreshnik nuclear-capable ballistic missile. Notably, however, this action neither approached the nuclear threshold nor changed the prevailing geographic zone of combat.

[83] Constant Méheut, 'Ukraine launches rare cross-border ground assault into Russia', *New York Times*, 7 Aug. 2024 (updated 14 Aug.), https://www.nytimes.com/2024/08/07/world/europe/ukraine-russia-cross-border-assault.html.

[84] Larisa Brown, 'Zelensky can use UK weapons on Russian soil, MoD confirms', *The Times*, 15 Aug. 2024.

[85] President of Ukraine, Volodymyr Zelenskyy, 'Our collective efforts determine what weapons are in the hands of our warriors—speech by the president at the meeting of heads of Ukraine's foreign diplomatic missions, "Wartime diplomacy: resilience, weapons, victory", 19 Aug. 2024, https//www.president.gov.ua/en/news/vid-nashoyi—spilnoyi-roboti-zalezhit-yaka-zbroya-v-rukah-u-n-92669.

[86] Warren Murray and agencies, 'Ukraine war briefing: Brics summit backfired on Putin with calls for peace, says Kyiv', *Guardian*, 24 Oct. 2024, https://www.theguardian.com/world/2024/oct/24/ukraine-war-briefing-brics-summit-backfired-on-putin-with-calls-for-peace-says-kyiv.

[87] Ukraine's western allies finally revealed that they had agreed to lift all remaining range restrictions on the use of their weapons in May 2025: David Charter, 'West to lift limits on Ukraine's use of missiles in Russia', *The Times*, 27 May 2025.

[88] President of Russia, 'Answer to a media question', 12 Sept. 2024, http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/75092; Anton Troianovski and Ivan Nechepurenko, 'Putin has issued many warnings to the West. Is this one different?', *New York Times*, 13 Sept. 2024, https://www.nytimes.com/2024/09/13/world/europe/russia-britain-ukraine-putin-nato-weapons.html.

Conclusion

Russia's war against Ukraine is unprecedented as a large-scale, technologically advanced European war on the borders of a nuclear great power, with that power being a party to the hostilities. Vladimir Putin has issued numerous nuclear threats over the conflict and has claimed that 'for us it is a matter of life and death'.[89] For its part, Ukraine clearly has had existential interests in the outcome of the war for the survival of its nationhood and statehood, while many western states consider international order at large to depend on the outcome of the war. This could suggest that unique escalatory risks are at play.

This article argues, however, that the effort to avert the most serious vertical and horizontal escalation and to mitigate its risk can be compared to the period of Cold War confrontation. As with the earlier era, Russia's war against Ukraine has involved a combination of threats or expressions of resolve, alongside measures of restraint, which relate dynamically with each other. A strategy to manipulate uncertainty has coexisted with a strategy to reduce uncertainty and has depended, crucially, on strategic signalling. This article finds that Russian efforts at nuclear intimidation and western warnings in response confirm Thomas Schelling's classic formulation of nuclear deterrence. Uncertainty is part of the effort to manipulate risk through threats, but also acts as a constraint on that effort for fear of dangerous escalation.

In terms of restraint, Alexander George's 'basic rule of prudence', avoiding a direct armed clash, has been crucial. This has induced Russia to refrain from directly challenging the defence of NATO territory. However, Russian threats have ensured that a few clear military thresholds have remained for western powers: the open participation of NATO soldiers in military operations on the territory of Ukraine, creating a no-fly zone over Ukraine and the use of airfields in NATO countries for strikes on the Russian army. Core objectives for the US Biden administration around the war, shaped by the risk environment, were to prevent direct conflict with Russia and prevent Russia from having an excuse to use a nuclear weapon. Arguably, however, a third objective was to prevent Ukraine from clearly losing, rather than ensuring that Ukraine wins or fully restores sovereignty over its territories.

In a significant contrast to the Cold War, however, there is no evidence that certain broader informal patterns of normative restraint on security commitments, let alone norms of competition, formed around Russia's war against Ukraine. This differs from George's conceptualization of superpower relations in certain 'third area' conflict zones. Instead, during the period studied up to January 2025, there was an increase in fundamental contestation between principles of international order and their territorial expression between western powers and Russia. But this reinforced the need felt by western powers to negotiate or signal additional tacit and rudimentary measures of restraint—ground rules—for escalation control to reduce the risk of collision with Russia: first between themselves and Ukraine,

[89] President of Russia, 'Interview to Dmitry Kiselev'.

and then, through an indirect process, with Russia. As forms of restraint, these remained fluid, malleable and weighted against western states in their provision of legal, defensive assistance to Ukraine. Such limited, prudential restraints do not require formal endorsement. They are very similar to the ground rules identified by George in the interaction of superpower alliances during late Cold War conflicts, except that the state at the centre of this contemporary war, Ukraine, exerts real agency and influence in defining such tacit rules.

I reveal how these ad hoc rules have emerged through diplomatic and military signalling—crucially in an interactive process of discursive jousting between Russian and western leaders. Without decision-making records, it is not possible to establish causal relationships between statements and threats made and actions or inaction (i.e. to explain why more serious escalation has not occurred). Yet, an overall pattern in western policy emerges of statements, 'testing the water', supported by progressive incremental steps of increasing military assistance to Ukraine when no obvious qualitative escalation by Russia has occurred beyond more brutal attacks on Ukraine.[90] A Russian analyst reasonably formulated this slow and piecemeal policy as 'a constant raising of the ceiling of the possible and lowering of the risk threshold by the West'.[91] This cautious 'salami-slicing' approach expresses Schelling's notion of states gently eroding a boundary of action in military commitment, although the process has been punctuated with a few more significant upgrades in military aid to Ukraine. Another Russian analyst portrayed the United States as deciding, while viewing Russia's 'big red lines', that 'we are going to cut these red lines into dozens of small thin red threads, to cross them bit by bit so that there was no big event', which could become a cause of war.[92]

It is an approach attuned to detecting any tangible change in Russian nuclear deployments and policies, rather than to simply responding to the language of nuclear intimidation. In this sense, western powers have taken seriously Russian discursive nuclear threats, even in the absence of escalatory red flags in the form of physical changes in the Russian nuclear force posture. But they have not allowed Russian threats to determine their risk threshold, which has adjusted along with their material support for Ukraine.

Several policy implications emerge. First, credible deterrence to avert dangerous escalation, in the conditions of this inherently risky European war, continues crucially to depend on political will and resolve, not just on material capabilities and the threat they can pose. Here, it should be noted that China as well as Russia is assessing western resolve; indeed, there is evidence that China as well as India exert a significant constraint on Russian efforts at nuclear coercion in the European theatre.

[90] For an analysis of this as 'cumulative deterrence', see Amir Lupovici, 'Deterrence by delivery of arms: NATO and the war in Ukraine', *Contemporary Security Policy* 44: 4, 2023, pp. 624–41, https://doi.org/10.1080/13523260.2023.2256572.

[91] Fyodor Lukyanov, 'Russia needs to explain its "red lines" to the West', *RT*, 2 June 2024.

[92] Sergei Markov, quoted in Robyn Dixon and Catherine Belton, 'Ukraine keeps crossing Russia's red lines. Putin keeps blinking', *Washington Post*, 24 Aug. 2024, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2024/08/24/putin-red-lines-war-ukraine.

Overall, the 'threat that leaves something to chance' and the ambiguous perceptions it generates—the psychological dimension—is built into the effort to avert acute escalation. Therefore 'control' of escalation is inherently uncertain. But if the resolve of western states to resist Russian territorial encroachments is perceived by Russia to weaken during a period of transition to a future less US-centric western alliance of support for Ukraine, this will invite graver risks, as Russia is likely to increase its reliance on nuclear blackmail. Nuclear forces remain central to the Russian concept of escalation management and NATO has had to respond. NATO has already adapted by openly publicizing its nuclear force exercises, which it did not do ten years ago, as well as the dual capability of its aircraft. However, it may be necessary for NATO to use more purposeful and proactive signaling language over its nuclear deterrent.

Second, there have been only a few critical measures of restraint in the delivery of western military assistance to Ukraine that should be viewed as safeguards against the most acute escalatory processes. Most unilateral ad hoc measures have been diluted or renounced, albeit through a process of testing and verbal signalling. In this respect US warnings, by private channels or openly, of the unacceptably high costs to Russia of any use of nuclear weapons have been—and continue to be—essential.

The messaging in this regard under the US Trump administration is unclear, however, as is the consistency of Trump's response to any further Russian rhetoric of nuclear intimidation. In July 2025, when former Russian president Dmitry Medvedev recommenced threatening language of this kind and levelled it at Trump personally, Trump responded with a highly unusual form of nuclear signalling—he claimed he redeployed two nuclear submarines in tactical positions closer to Russia.[93] Trump noted this was done for 'the safety of our people'; 'a threat was made'; and 'when you mentioned the word nuclear, you know my eyes light up and I say, we better be careful because it's the ultimate threat'.[94] This suggests Trump will remain highly sensitive to Russian nuclear rhetoric around Ukraine.

In practice, the overcautious, incremental approach of the Biden administration in 2023–2024 over numerous types of military aid enabled Russia to transform the war into one of grinding attrition, disadvantaging Ukraine. The policy could instead have been based on the principle of 'the more Russian forces advance, the more meaningful [Ukraine's key western partner's] military support will be',

[93] Medvedev, a key ally of Putin, wrote on social media that Trump's pledge of possible new sanctions on Russia over Ukraine was a threat and a step towards war between Russia and the US and then referenced the Soviet Union's emergency nuclear strike capabilities. Trump responded to what he called 'foolish and inflammatory statements', noting that 'words are very important and can lead to unintended consequences'. After Trump's own ramped-up nuclear signalling, Putin's spokesman sought to distance Putin from Medvedev's comments and observed disingenuously that 'we believe that everyone should be very, very careful with nuclear rhetoric': David L. Stern, 'Trump says he repositioned nuclear subs in veiled threat to Russia', *The Washington Post*, 1 Aug. 2025, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2025/08/01/ukraine-russia-kyiv-death-toll; 'Kremlin urges "careful use of nuclear rhetoric"', *RT*, 4 Aug. 2025.

[94] George Grylls, 'Trump to deploy two nuclear submarines after Russian "provocations"', *The Times*, 1 Aug. 2025, Trump to deploy two nuclear submarines after Russian 'provocations', https://www.thetimes.com/article/e03d3718-7f51-4a49-80f9-9311916dc1843?shareToken=6c32e0fd206667cdd5105161a740e8e0.

short of NATO forces posing a direct threat to Russia itself.[95] But the tentative US military deliveries to Ukraine, replicated by several other major western states, helped shift the war against Ukraine, at the cost of grave Ukrainian human and material losses and a further truncated Ukrainian state.

Third, it has to be accepted that in supporting Ukraine and thus bolstering European security there will remain, at least in the medium term, a risk of inadvertent serious escalation from events on the ground or shifts in state policies. This remains despite deconfliction channels, hotlines and efforts to suppress active combat. This risk may rise with the development and application of new military technologies, enabling weapons systems to have a greater strategic effect, or from a Russian determination to instrumentalize its superiority over western states in terms of tactical nuclear systems in the European theatre, as well as from a variety of Russian 'deniable' actions against western state interests. But this escalation risk is a burden to be borne in supporting Ukraine to forestall still more serious future Russian threats to the European security order.

Finally, Russian efforts to normalize the annexation of neighbouring territories and the way in which Russia regards nuclear arms as part of that process pose a broader risk with global repercussions. This arises from the example of Russian action in using conventional forces to seize territory in Europe and then relying on its nuclear capabilities to hold that territory—a grave strategic challenge for Ukraine and Europe, but potentially also for global nuclear competition.[96] It threatens to transform strategic deterrence into a doctrine to support territorial expansion by force under the protective umbrella of nuclear intimidation. Overall, therefore, consequential escalatory dangers will remain in the aftermath of active combat in the most serious European war in three-quarters of a century.

[95] Robin Niblett, 'A western victory plan for Ukraine', *Foreign Policy*, 25 Oct. 2024, https://foreignpolicy.com/2024/10/25/ukraine-russia-war-west-victory-plan.
[96] Arceneaux, 'Whether to worry', p. 572.