

Is a Nuclear Trigger in the Russia-Ukraine War Possible?

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Since the beginning of the Russia-Ukraine War, much talk has been about the potential use of low-yield tactical nuclear weapons. What makes everything seem particularly risky is that the Russian Army's [performance](#) is not one expected from a first-rate international power.

Ukraine should have conceded eastern Ukraine to Russia by now or lost its sovereignty entirely. Fortunately, this has not happened after eight months of combat.

Instead, a major Ukrainian [counter-offensive](#) launched in September has pushed the Russians from occupied territory in the northeast in [Kharkiv](#). Ukrainian forces have now also liberated [Kherson city](#), and the entire west bank of Kherson Oblast. This was a significant loss of territory by Russian forces, now potentially making eastern Kherson vulnerable to Ukrainian forces and exposing Crimea to Kyiv's counter-offensive operations.

Russia's conventional military has proven incapable of destroying the Armed Forces of Ukraine (AFU) in open battle or holding onto annexed territory. Instead, Russian missile and drone strikes target [civilians](#) and Ukraine's [water and energy infrastructure](#). Moscow hopes that in the short-term, terrorising Ukrainian civilians might force the Ukrainian government into a ceasefire. In the medium term, as winter approaches, Moscow also hopes that Kyiv, lacking the capacity to provide power and water to its people, will turn average Ukrainians against the leadership of Volodymyr Zelensky. Both Russian strategies seem likely to fail as the West galvanises around Ukraine and continues to provide military, economic and technical assistance to the war-ravaged country. Winter will be a factor in all of this, but how much will be determined by European efforts to isolate themselves from their energy crisis caused by the end of cheap oil and gas imports from Russia.

The poor performance and lack of resolve of the Russian Army have revealed glaring systemic weaknesses.

First, [corruption](#) has riddled the supporting defence industry base meaning that supply chains cannot provide timely and efficient equipment replacement.

Second, Russia's [dependence](#) on international sources of military technology means that under a tight international sanctions regime, Russian arms industries no longer have the capacity to produce weapons in their entirety.

Finally, a military organisation predicated on tough, some would say [brutal discipline](#) does nothing for the morale of the soldiers in it. Especially when the aim is to forcibly subdue a neighbouring country with which Russia shares deep historical and cultural ties.

So, knowing all of this and what was and continues to be at stake, will Putin use a nuclear weapon to preserve his gains?

It has to be remembered that Putin's forces have about [15 per cent](#) of Ukraine under occupation, an area about the size of Portugal. As a result, his conventional forces are finding it difficult to sustain themselves in this war. And the Armed Forces of Ukraine will likely continue to make further gains at the expense of the Russians as Western weapons and training [transform](#) a highly motivated AFU into a first-rate conventional fighting force.

Putin will want to act as rationally as possible despite what many commentators have said thus far about the Russian president's state of mind. This will mean he will carefully climb what is known as the [escalatory ladder](#) in a disciplined way.

For example, the first logical step would be to openly deploy tactical nuclear weapons to the annexed Ukrainian territories, creating a 'nuclear trigger'. This

scenario would attempt to create an event similar to the [1962 Cuban Missile Crisis](#), with the endpoint being Russia forcing Kyiv to accept its annexation of Ukrainian territory as a permanent readjustment of Russia's borders. The secondary consideration would be to frighten the EU with the prospect of nuclear war, thereby changing the domestic political dynamics of EU states against their continuing support of Ukraine.

Should this not deter Kyiv, the next logical step would be [detonating](#) a tactical nuclear weapon on an uninhabited part of the Ukrainian mainland or somewhere in the Black Sea.

The actual detonation of a battlefield weapon will shock the world in a way that imagining such a detonation cannot. It will also allow other autocratic nuclear-armed states, China and North Korea, or nuclear states at heightened confrontation, such as Pakistan and India, to contemplate their use.

Let us be under no illusion here. If Putin gives the order for a nuclear demonstration, this will have far-reaching consequences for international order and warfare in the 21st Century.

But what if Putin, after all his threats, doesn't use nuclear weapons?

He'll go down in history as the 'man who cried nuke'. A sad historical figure who did not follow through on his threats, with Russia in tatters and Putin's legacy shattered. Importantly, it will signal to the world that Russia's nuclear deterrent has failed. If nuclear powers, including autocratic ones, are no longer willing to contemplate the use of nuclear weapons during an active war, their utility and their expense might be delegitimised not just in Russia, but in every nuclear armed country, except perhaps in North Korea where Kim Jong Un might hang on to the idea that 'the bomb' will guarantee his survival and that of his regime.

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