

Vladimir Putin and how he learnt to 'love the bomb'

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Introduction

Russian President, Vladimir Putin, has recently announced that he will give the order to deploy tactical nuclear weapons into neighbouring 'friendly' Belarus. This action has forced the EU's hand on placing harsher sanctions on Belarus. Of course, Putin used the stationing of American tactical nuclear weapons in allied European countries in a tome on 'moral equivalence', placing the 'mighty' Russian Federation on par with the United States. While NATO and the EU have criticised this Russian move, what they are able and willing to do about it is anybody's guess. Coming so close after China's President Xi Jinping visited Russia, it is unlikely that China was caught by surprise by this announcement. Indeed, Putin and Xi may well have co-ordinated this plan together behind closed doors.

The Nuclear Equation – DU = tactical nuke²

Stationing tactical nuclear weapons in Belarus is designed to deter NATO from supplying more weapons to the Armed Forces of Ukraine (AFU) in the lead up to its anticipated 2023 counter-offensive. Perhaps more importantly, it was Putin's answer to the UK's announcement that it would supply the AFU with depleted uranium (DU) shells for its new Western-

derived armoured forces. What is the significance of DU shells?

"Depleted uranium shells sharpen on impact, which further increases their ability to bore through armour, and they ignite after contact."¹

Being of dense metal, depleted uranium shells can penetrate armour, especially on tanks such as the T-64/T-72/T-80 with non-existent or substandard active protection systems. In fact, this type of ammunition is generally considered a 'force multiplier' as demonstrated during the 1991 and 2003 Gulf Wars.² Saddam Hussein's Iraqi Army was effectively based on Soviet/Russian armour³ not dissimilar from those Russian tanks Ukrainian forces are currently fighting with and against. These shells were also used by Western forces during the Kosovo War in 1999⁴, again in combat against Soviet/Russian-derived Serbian armour. Russia has supplies of DU shells in its inventory⁵. It is unknown whether the Russian Army has issued orders for their use, although unsubstantiated reports out of Ukraine appear to indicate that it has⁶.

In answer to London's decision to supply DU rounds to Ukraine, Putin countered by deploying short-range tactical nuclear weapons to Belarus. The hope being that this would revive the seriousness of Putin's nuclear threats.

Up to now the world has gotten used to Putin's nuclear threats. He has issued many such threats but with no credible follow-up action⁷. Moving tactical nuclear weapons into Belarus is Russia's first move to revive international fear of Russia's nuclear deterrence. With Russian tactical nuclear weapons stationed in Belarus, a country that has already been used by Russia as its operational springboard into

Ukraine,⁸ and a country right next to NATO members Poland, Lithuania and Latvia – there is an implied threat to those countries as well as to Ukraine, thereby broadening the potential impact of this move.

White Russia Supporting Mother Russia?

Belarusian President, Alexander Lukashenko, has allowed Russian forces on Belarusian territory to launch conventional assaults on Ukraine, so why not Russian tactical nuclear strikes?

Belarus while acknowledged by the West as Putin's enabler, the country is not a combatant in Putin's Special Military Operation. This makes it difficult for the West to coerce Minsk into rejecting any Russian request to use it as both a base for Russian conventional and nuclear operations into Ukraine.

Lukashenko is a weak leader, totally dependent on Putin and Russia to remain in power over a restive Belarusian population⁹.

Lukashenko's only option is to remain tied to Putin or else lose both his position (most likely his life) and the sovereignty of Belarus to the Russian Federation. No doubt Putin and the Kremlin have contingency plans in place to capture Belarus should Lukashenko fail to retain power¹⁰. Furthermore, as NATO has no interest in expanding the war beyond Ukrainian territory, it is unlikely that the West would move against Lukashenko, effectively leaving the Belarusian dictator to Putin's mercy and his operational plans for as long as the war lasts.

Crimea – the Thin Edge of the Wedge

Arguably of greatest concern to Putin is the loss of Crimea to Ukrainian forces.

Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky has indicated his desire to see all Ukrainian territory captured by Russia since 2014 returned to the sovereign control of Kyiv¹¹.

This seems like a reasonable position until one examines what Crimea means to Russia.

For much of modern Russian history, Crimea has been intimately tied to Russia since the Russian Empire's original capture of the Crimean Khanate in 1783¹². Then in 1954 Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev transferred Crimea to the Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic¹³. This move was, at least from the official perspective of the USSR, to commemorate the 300th anniversary of the reunification of Ukraine with Russia under the Treaty of Pereyaslav¹⁴. It was also done to consolidate the internal administrative borders of the Soviet state by allowing larger Ukraine to absorb neighbouring Crimea¹⁵. But later historical analysis suggests that Khrushchev's move was a consequence of a power struggle in the Kremlin after the death of Stalin between Khrushchev and his party rival, Soviet Prime Minister Georgii Malenkov¹⁶. Nonetheless Ukrainian-Russian reunification was long considered a reality by Moscow. A permanent fixture of the Tsarist Russian state *and* the Soviet state in a historic continuum analogous to England's Union with Scotland in 1707. No one in the Kremlin thought that Russian cultural and political dominance over Ukraine would ever be challenged – let alone that the modern Russian dominated Soviet state would ever collapse.

Ukrainian independence was at best a fringe movement by diaspora minorities living in foreign countries harking back to a long forgotten time. But for Russia, over two hundred years of colonial ownership of Crimea saw the development of demographic shifts in the population favouring ethnic Russians or acculturated local Ukrainian Russian speakers. The indigenous Tartars were forcibly evacuated out of Crimea by Soviet dictator Joseph Stalin in 1944, fearing this group's sympathies to NAZI Germany and their ethnic Turkish kin across the Black Sea¹⁷.

It is through Crimea that Russia lays historic claim to a mythical cultural connection with Greece and Byzantium¹⁸. There is also a religious significance of the peninsula concerning St. Vladimir, the ruler of Kyivan Rus in the late 900s CE¹⁹ who laid the foundations for the Russian Empire and its acceptance of Orthodox Christianity. While these are narrative contrivances which ascribe a far deeper connection between Crimea and Russia than actually exist, they are powerful in that they motivate Putin's desire to hold on to this territory even at risk of nuclear war. Beyond the mystical and the mythical though, Crimea does have a majority of ethnic Russians and acculturated Ukrainian and minority Russian speakers.

Prior to the collapse of the Soviet Union, the Crimean port-city of Sevastopol was the home of the Soviet Black Sea fleet. It remained the home of the Russian Black Sea fleet after Ukraine's independence from Russia in 1992, leading to tension between Kyiv and Moscow over the status of Sevastopol²⁰. A combination of bilateral agreements between Ukraine and Russia coupled to weak governments and political instability in Ukraine meant that Russia controlled Sevastopol as 'its territory' until Putin's masterstroke of the

2014 capture of Crimea, where the entire peninsula fell under Russian control in a bloodless land-grab. Central to everything that is currently happening in Ukraine, Crimea is seen as territory that Russia will not forego. That means that if there were to be international negotiations to a ceasefire in the current Russia-Ukraine War, the Kremlin might effectively sacrifice its position in the Donbas but not Crimea.

This then poses some problems for the West and its support for Zelensky's Ukraine.

Countdown to Oblivion?

If Crimea is Russia's red line and if Russia's Army finds itself incapable of holding this territory against Ukrainian forces, what then?

Russia is the world's biggest nuclear power with 5,977 confirmed warheads²¹. It has both strategic and tactical nuclear weapons that it holds as its ultimate trump card in any confrontation with any country – peer competitor or not. In a hot conventional war that he seems to be losing, what is the likelihood of Putin issuing an order to strike the AFU with a tactical nuclear weapon or weapons? Could it be that Ukraine becomes a victim of its own success? That if the AFU is too successful on the battlefield it will be check-mated by Russia's nuclear rook? Would the AFU continue to fight? Could it? The shock of this sort of attack would be enormous. NATO heads would likely call an emergency meeting, not necessarily to up the ante or retaliate but to immediately de-escalate the war. That means pressuring Zelensky to issue an immediate and unconditional ceasefire. And if Zelensky calls on the AFU to stop fighting, would Russia stop dropping nuclear ordnance? Once that line has

been crossed, it is unlikely that Putin will stop until he sees his forces have the upper hand. There is a similarity between conducting nuclear strikes, terrorism or genocide. These actions are hard to stop once an actor commits to them since they tend to set off a sequence of events making it impossible to angle back from the edge. Why run the risk of using one when using ten or more will be able to maximise your war aims? Russia would be severely castigated for using one such weapon as it would by using ten. By using ten, Ukrainian resistance might be completely broken and Ukraine in its entirety might fall to Russia.

What would be the West's reaction?

With few international statesmen of the calibre necessary to bring a sense of fair play and order to the field, force would be the arbiter of this war and that might mean a decapitation strike on Kyiv and the end of Zelensky. A one kiloton tactical nuclear weapon on a city like Kyiv would not destroy the city, but it would cripple the Ukrainian capital as the seat of government. That might be just enough damage to bring Ukrainian resistance to a halt. A one kiloton strike against Lviv would do enough damage to the city as a NATO staging base and logistics hub for funnelling in Western weapons and supplies, while at the same time rattling the nerves of Poland and the rest of Eastern Europe.

The United Nations

The United Nations is no true independent arbiter of peace.

It has no way of independently and forcefully intervening in a conflict to bring well-equipped fighting forces to heal.

The organisation is dependent on the wheeling and dealing of independent nation states, all with their own varying national interests. There is no actual 'global interest' that countries will mobilise around since all countries in the General Assembly and especially in the Security Council do not want to be pegged by international rules that limit their movements. So, when Kyiv demands UN action against Russia for having declared its intention to station tactical nuclear weapons in Belarus, it should prepare itself for disappointment²². Russia is one of the five members of the United Nations Security Council (UNSC). If voting is a measure of the orientation of the UNSC, think again. Russia can veto any motion designed to hem it in or otherwise constrain its actions. And as 'no-limits' friend China also sits on the UNSC, while it might not vote in favour of the Western members, or Russia, it will abstain from such a vote, thereby weakening any 'collective decision' against Moscow, rendering it completely useless or at best, meekly symbolic.

Conclusion

With Russia's decision to deploy tactical nuclear weapons in Belarus, Putin's nuclear threats become real again, as does Russia's nuclear deterrence. Whether this means we are all one step closer to a nuclear strike against Ukraine is still in the realm of speculation. But now, it seems we cannot completely rule this out. Belarus will play its part because the big man in Minsk cannot avoid his orbit around the bigger man in Moscow. Zelensky, as heroic a figure he has become among Western media circles might be a victim of his own success if Russian conventional forces fail to hold their own in the Donbas, but particularly Crimea, and it will be on this small but strategically

important peninsula that this war will ultimately hang.

Views expressed in this article are not necessarily those of SAGE International

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¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Ibid.

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