

Preventing a nuclear escalation in the Ukraine conflict

By Ayesha Zafar

The Russia-Ukraine conflict has rekindled global anxieties about the potential use of nuclear weapons. It has exposed the complexities of nuclear deterrence in a highly volatile security environment. As tensions have escalated, the risk of nuclear hostilities – whether tactical, demonstrative, or accidental – has become a major point of concern.¹ The Russian administration has repeatedly threatened to use nuclear weapons and announced an update of its nuclear doctrine in November 2024, thereby lowering the threshold for the use of nuclear weapons. Therefore, in critically examining Russia's nuclear doctrine, this article aims to identify the key triggers for escalation and evaluate the strategic responses of the international community. It investigates how NATO countries, supported by the US's extended nuclear deterrence commitment, have maintained a calibrated approach, combining military assistance to Ukraine and a high level of nuclear readiness, to ensure a precarious balance that prevented a major nuclear escalation. Underscoring the relevance of nuclear deterrence in the Ukraine conflict, it further delineates how Russia employed nuclear sabre-rattling as a deterrent and an enabler to achieve its strategic goals. Likewise, assessing the impact of Donald Trump's re-election and his 'America First' mantra on the Ukraine conflict, this article discusses potential ways to prevent the conflict from going nuclear, while reinforcing the significance of renewed multilateral cooperation, diplomatic engagement, and a unified Western resolve to deter Russian aggression.

Keywords: *sabre-rattling; nuclear deterrence; strategic ambiguity; nuclear escalation; nuclear brinkmanship; escalation management*

Introduction

The Russia-Ukraine conflict marks a watershed moment in the post-Cold War security environment with its effects felt throughout the international system. It strengthened the “kind of camp politics or block politics which polarise international relations, escalate political and ideological tensions and contribute to further militarisation” (Kusa 2022: 11). The conflict significantly shaped the patterns of diplomatic and economic engagements, and highlighted the complexities of geopolitical tension, leaving Ukraine's path to peace fraught with challenges. The US's disregard for its promise of ‘not one inch further’ – an assurance given by the US Secretary of State James Baker to Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev in 1990 that NATO would not expand eastward beyond Germany – combined with its misinterpretation of Russia's ‘Nyet means Nyet’ contributed to the emergence of a geopolitical ‘red line’.

On 24 February 2022, President Putin announced the start of a “special military operation,” intended to “demilitarise and denazify Ukraine,” whilst calling out the West for its “eastward expansion of NATO.”

Coupled with this is Russia's ambiguous nuclear doctrine, its history of brinkmanship and President Vladimir Putin's repeated nuclear threats, which have further raised global anxieties about the

probability of a nuclear escalation, whether deliberate or inadvertent. In June 2023, Putin announced the stationing of a first batch of Russia's tactical nuclear weapons in Belarus, calling the move a “containment” and a reminder to those who were “thinking of inflicting a strategic defeat” on Russia (BBC 2023). This was the first time since the Cold War that Russia's nuclear weapons were stationed outside its territory.² Thus, the global nuclear order, which was already under strain due to the collapse of the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty in 2019 and the uncertain fate of the New Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (START) agreement after its expiry in 2026, faced renewed threats.

With this, evolving alliances and changing political winds in Western capitals further complicated the situation. For instance, NATO expanded its presence in Eastern Europe with Finland and Sweden becoming members of the alliance in April 2023 and March 2024, respectively. Meanwhile, Ukraine's counter-offensives in the Kharkiv and Kherson oblasts in 2022, and its western-backed efforts in Crimea and Donbas, posed existential dilemmas for Russia. In all of this, President Donald Trump's re-election and his ‘America First’ mantra prompted a significant shift in US foreign policy and raised new concerns in Europe over the reliability of US security guarantees and the future of global alliances.

In June 2023, Putin announced the stationing of a first batch of Russia's tactical nuclear weapons in Belarus, calling the move a “containment” and a reminder to those who were “thinking of inflicting a strategic defeat” on Russia. This was the first time since the Cold War that Russia's nuclear weapons were stationed outside its territory.

This paper endeavours to unpack these complexities by exploring the underlying causes of the Russia-Ukraine conflict. It offers a careful analysis of Russia's nuclear doctrine and explicates how Russia maintains a strategic ambiguity regarding its nuclear use to achieve its intended objectives. Underscoring the relevance of nuclear deterrence theory, this paper critically examines why both sides have refrained from the use of nuclear weapons despite repeated threats from the Russian administration to use these weapons. Highlighting the importance of diplomatic engagement, it also suggests some probable pathways to prevent nuclear confrontation in the future.

Historical context and catalysts of the Russia-Ukraine conflict

On 24 February 2022, President Putin announced the start of a “special military operation,” intended to “demilitarise and denazify Ukraine,” whilst calling out the West for its “eastward expansion of NATO” (President of the Russian Federation 2022). In response, G7 countries condemned Russia's “large-scale military aggression” against the “territorial integrity, sovereignty and independence of Ukraine” and called it an “unprovoked and completely unjustified” move which should be stopped (Council of

the European Union 2022). The then US Secretary of State, Antony Blinken, asserted that the Ukraine conflict is “bigger” than the two countries and it is a “crisis with global consequences” that “requires global attention and action” (Mbah / Wasum 2022: 150). Consequently, in March 2022, Biden announced a ban on Russian oil and gas imports to “inflict further pain on Putin” and noted that “Russia’s aggression is costing us all, and it is no time for profiteering or price gouging” (US Embassy & Consulates in Italy 2022).

Nonetheless, Russia continued its atrocities, especially in southern and eastern Ukraine. By May 2022, Russian soldiers managed to seize the “strategically significant port of Mariupol,” and in September, they took control over four oblasts: Donetsk, Kherson, Luhansk, and Zaporizhzhia (Faqr 2025: 988). The Kremlin’s spokesperson Dmitri Peskov stated, “all these territories are inalienable parts of the Russian Federation,” and “their security is provided for at the same level as [it is for] the rest of Russia’s territory” (Bugos 2022). To counter this invasion, on 8 October 2022 Ukrainian forces exploded the Kerch Strait bridge connecting Crimea and Russia and managed to push back Russian soldiers with successful counteroffensives in Kharkiv and parts of the Kherson region.

In 2023, the front line stabilised though fighting continued in Avdiivka and Bakhmut, which Russian forces took over in early 2024 alongside their advancements in the Donetsk region. As of mid-2025, the situation has not improved with tensions still going on as Russia holds most of Luhansk and large parts of Donetsk and Zaporizhzhia region, while Ukraine controls western Zaporizhzhia and mounts limited counterattacks.³

So as to understand the war today, it is crucial to understand the history of these tensions and the underlying causes behind the onset of this conflict, which has shaken the foundations of European security.

A history of tensions

The Ukraine conflict, now in its fourth year, has deep historical roots that go back to 1991, when Ukraine gained independence. Since then, it has been considered one of Russia’s strongest satellite states. However, after the fall of Soviet Union, Ukraine struggled to decide whether it should lean towards the East (the Russian Federation) or the West (European Union) (Gierczak 2020: 5). During the Orange Revolution (2004-2005), Ukraine “opposed the influence of Russian politics on constitutionally independent Ukraine and indicated Ukrainians’ willingness to institutionalise its democracy” (Gierczak 2020: 2). Protesters marched in favour of pro-Western candidate Viktor Yushchenko, calling the election rigged in favour of pro-Russian candidate Viktor Yanukovich. Nonetheless, due to the religious, ethnic, and linguistic divisions within the society, especially in the Donetsk and Luhansk regions, some parts of the provinces identified themselves as belonging to Russia.

The complex interplay of historical grievances, nationalistic fervour, and geopolitical ambitions with Russia’s annexation of Crimea in March 2014 and Putin’s support for pro-Russian demonstrations in the Donbass area laid the grounds for the current tensions between Russia and Ukraine.

Andreas Umland (2018: 38) argued that there was a “largely manufactured, yet nevertheless widespread collective agreement within large parts of Russia’s population about the rightfulness,

justice and legitimacy of Moscow’s various territorial, political, cultural and economic claims towards Ukraine.” Moreover, Putin’s personality, together with his “imperialist ambitions,” played a key role behind the ongoing crisis (Götz / Ekman 2024: 194). Neil Melvin (2022) asserted that Putin, who often draws parallels between himself and Peter the Great, is “driven by a sense of a historic mission to rectify perceived injustices and to regather lost Russian lands.” Thus, the complex interplay of historical grievances, nationalistic fervour, and geopolitical ambitions with Russia’s annexation of Crimea in March 2014 and Putin’s support for pro-Russian demonstrations in the Donbass area laid the grounds for the current tensions between the two countries.

Kyiv’s path to NATO: A strategic flashpoint with Moscow

NATO’s eastward expansion since the Cold War has posed major challenges. In June 2020, Ukraine became a member of NATO’s Enhanced Opportunity Partners Programme, which gave it “access to interoperability programmes and exercises, and more sharing of information, including lessons learned” (NATO 2020). In response, in November 2021 Putin cautioned against the stationing of missile defence systems in Ukraine, similar to those in Poland and Romania. He asserted that Russia “would have to create a similar threat for those who are threatening” and warned that NATO countries’ deployment of soldiers or weapons would result in crossing the “red line” and trigger a strong response (The Guardian 2021). Besides, Moscow announced the deployment of an estimated 90,000 troops near its border with Ukraine in December 2021 (The Guardian 2021). The Kremlin further demanded a “legally binding guarantee” that NATO would not engage in any military activity in Eastern Europe and Ukraine and the “withdrawal of multinational NATO battalions from Poland and from the Baltic states of Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania that were once in the Soviet Union” (Reuters 2021).

Thus, it is evident from these demands that Ukraine’s membership of NATO alliance as requested by President Volodymyr Zelenskyy is viewed through the “lens of historical rivalry and distrust, reinforcing the perception of Western encirclement and aggression” (Jakupec 2025: 43). Bornu (2025: 190-191) noted that Ukraine’s desire to join NATO and gain EU membership was seen by Russia as a “direct threat to its influence and security”. Likewise, Mearsheimer (2014: 77) asserted that the US and its European allies “share most of the responsibility for the crisis” due to “NATO’s enlargement, the central element of a larger strategy to move Ukraine out of Russia’s orbit and integrate it into the West”. He emphasised that Russian leaders since the mid-1990s had made it clear that they “would not stand by while their strategically important neighbour turned into a western bastion” (Mearsheimer 2014: 77). Stephen M. Walt (2022) argued that “great powers are never indifferent to the geostrategic forces arrayed on their borders, and Russia would care deeply about Ukraine’s political alignment even if someone else were in charge.”

The deputy secretary of the Russian Security Council, Alexander Venediktov, stated that Ukraine’s application for a “fast-track NATO membership is rather a propaganda move” and averred that “Kiev is well aware that such a step would mean a guaranteed escalation to World War Three.”

Consequently, on 17 February 2022, a few days before the war officially started, the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MOFA) specified its apprehensions about the “increasing US and NATO

military activity in the direct vicinity of Russia's borders, whereas its red lines, core security interests, and sovereign right to defend them continue to be ignored," and proclaimed that Moscow would respond with "military-technical measures" (MFA 2022). The deputy secretary of the Russian Security Council, Alexander Venediktov, further stated that Ukraine's application for a "fast-track NATO membership is rather a propaganda move" and averred that "Kiev is well aware that such a step would mean a guaranteed escalation to World War Three" (TASS 2022). These growing tensions raised alarms regarding the potential use of nuclear weapons further, as discussed in the section below.

Escalation dynamics and nuclear threats in the Russia-Ukraine conflict

The risk of nuclear use has increased as nuclear arms control and disarmament diplomacy are suffering from major setbacks following the Ukraine conflict. During his presidential address in February 2022 Putin emphasised that "even after the dissolution of the USSR and losing a considerable part of its capabilities, today's Russia remains one of the most powerful nuclear states" and that it has "a certain advantage in several cutting-edge weapons" (President of the Russian Federation 2022). Only three days after the conflict started, Putin announced that Russia's nuclear deterrence forces were put on "high alert" and ordered "minister of defence and the chief of the general staff [of the Russian armed forces] to transfer the deterrence forces of the Russian army to a special mode of combat duty" (Roth et al. 2022; Lewis 2022). Tensions escalated further when Russia conducted successful tests of new and advanced Sarmat intercontinental ballistic missile (Talmadge 2022), and when two Russian warplanes, SU-27 fighters and SU-24 attack planes, loaded with nuclear weapons, reportedly violated Swedish airspace in early March 2022 (Szumski 2022).

Nonetheless, it was not until September 2022 that the world seemed to be getting much closer to nuclear war, as Putin ordered partial mobilisation of 300,000 reservists (Holmes 2025: 68) and argued that this move was "necessary to protect sovereignty, security, and territorial integrity of Russia" (Vasilyeva 2022). He warned that Moscow had "various high-impact weapons, in some ways more powerful than those of NATO countries" and that Russia would "certainly use all means at its disposal" to counter the threats (The Telegraph 2022). In response, Biden warned against the "risk of nuclear Armageddon," noting that the danger has reached its highest since the Cuban Missile Crisis of 1962 (Al Jazeera 2022a). He asserted that "any use of nuclear weapons in this conflict on any scale would be completely unacceptable to us as well as the rest of the world and would entail severe consequences" (Sky News 2022). The US also sent its Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) director William Burns to meet Sergey Naryshkin, head of Russia's Foreign Intelligence Service, to Ankara, Turkey, to warn Russia of the consequences if it resorted to any use of nuclear weapons in Ukraine (Holmes 2025: 70).

Meanwhile, NATO kicked off its annual nuclear exercise, Steadfast Noon, in October 2022 (Bugos 2022). On the other hand, Moscow dispatched "long-range, nuclear-capable Tu22M3 Backfire bombers and MiG-31 fighters carrying the latest Kinzhal (Dagger) hypersonic cruise missile to Russian bases in Syria and Kaliningrad" (Blank 2022: 67-74). It was during this peak of nuclear escalation that President Xi Jinping of China made a plea after meeting German Chancellor Olaf Scholz that "the international community should [...] jointly oppose the use or threats to use nuclear weapons, advocate that nuclear weapons must not be

used and nuclear conflicts must not be fought, in order to prevent a nuclear crisis in Eurasia" (Al Jazeera 2022b).

Thus, President Xi Jinping's mediation helped discourage Putin from crossing the nuclear threshold. However, the situation remained tense as in March 2023, Putin announced his intention to deploy Russia's nuclear weapons in Belarus and asserted that "around ten Belarusian aircraft are already prepared to use these weapons" (ICAN 2023). In response, the G7 countries reiterated their position that "threats by Russia of nuclear weapon use, let alone any use of nuclear weapons by Russia, in the context of its aggression against Ukraine are inadmissible" (White House 2023). Despite the wider condemnation, Russia did not stop, and in November 2024, Putin announced amendments to Russia's nuclear doctrine, which would be "formalised as necessary" and expanded the "category of states and military unions subject to nuclear deterrence" (TASS 2024).

Henceforth, Putin, who retains control of operational-strategic initiatives, finds no reason to "refrain from attempting to intimidate NATO via rhetorical-threat escalation or operation escalation on the ground" (Blank 2022: 67-74). The section below further investigates Russia's nuclear rhetoric to understand its strategic signalling and identify the key reasons for the non-use of nuclear weapons despite repeated threats.

Russia's nuclear doctrine and strategic signalling

Understanding Russia's nuclear doctrine and its strategic signalling is crucial to comprehending the risk of nuclear escalation in the current conflict. For Moscow, its nuclear doctrine is not merely a military document but a key instrument of political signalling, which aims to influence adversaries' calculations and secure its strategic objectives. It is centred around the idea of "escalate to de-escalate," which implies that "Russian first strike using a tactical nuclear warhead in wartime could shock an enemy and lead to the conflict's ending on terms favourable to Russia" (Bolt 2025; Sokov 2022). Thus, for Russia nuclear weapons play a key role as both a deterrent and a tool for battlefield coercion. Blank (2022: 57) proclaimed that in "Russian political culture, displaying the state's capacity to intimidate others is of utmost importance."

For Moscow, its nuclear doctrine is not merely a military document but a key instrument of political signalling, which aims to influence adversaries' calculations and secure its strategic objectives. Thus, nuclear weapons for Russia play a key role as both a deterrent and a tool for battlefield coercion.

Arceneaux (2023: 567) argued that during the Ukraine war, nuclear weapons "served an enabling function that emboldened Russia to conduct its invasion of Ukraine," and that Moscow leveraged nuclear threats to "pursue its pre-existing interests of territorial control and political influence over Ukraine." He further noted that Russia manipulated the dangers "associated with an escalation to obtain a better bargaining position" and that its language surrounding the use of nuclear weapons remains "uncertain" (Arceneaux 2023: 569). Hence, Russia maintains a certain level of ambiguity and uncertainty regarding the criteria for nuclear use, often framed around threats to a state's survival or territorial integrity, as evident during the Ukraine conflict. The key objective is to create a psychological deterrent effect and leave the opposing side uncertain about the actual threshold of the red lines, causing them to restrain their actions out of the fear of miscalculation. For instance, Russia's deployment of tactical nuclear weapons,

such as the stationing of nuclear arms in Belarus, is not only a military threat but also a powerful political signal aimed at NATO and Ukraine to reiterate the immediacy and proximity of the nuclear risk. Bell (2024: 503) noted that stationing of these nukes on Belarusian soil “does not alter the strategic situation in any way,” but is “designed to create additional unpredictability and risk by creating additional avenues by which things could spiral out of control and across the nuclear threshold.” Further concerns were raised by the Kremlin’s announcement of an update to its nuclear doctrine in November 2024.

Whereas Russia’s military doctrine (2000) had allowed for nuclear use “in situations critical to the national security,” and the 2010 edition limited them to situations in which “the very existence of the state is under threat” (Sokov 2022), the 2024 edition allowed new conditions for nuclear use. Dmitry Peskov, the Kremlin’s spokesperson declared that “Russia will view an aggression from a non-nuclear state, carried out with participation or support of a nuclear state as their joint attack” (TASS 2024). Moreover, “massive launch of strategic and tactical planes, cruise missiles, drones, hypersonic and other aerial vehicles and their violation of the Russian border will become grounds for the use of nuclear weapons” alongside any “aggression against Belarus” (TASS 2024).

Russia maintains a certain level of ambiguity and uncertainty regarding the criteria for nuclear use, often framed around threats to a state’s survival or territorial integrity. The key objective is to create a psychological deterrent effect and leave the opposing side uncertain about the actual threshold of the red lines, causing them to restrain their actions out of the fear of miscalculation.

In all of this, the stationing of North Korean troops in Russia adds a new layer to the strategic dynamics. It reflects the conventional military reinforcement and political solidarity against the West. Under the Mutual Defence Pact, signed in June 2024, both North Korea and Russia agreed to come to each other’s defence if either of them was under attack. They appreciated the developing ties between the two countries as the North Korean President Kim Jong Un called the deal “the strongest ever treaty” that strengthened the relations to a “higher level of an alliance” and “accelerated the creation of a new multipolar world” (McCurry / Roth 2024).

By contrast, NATO Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg told the media that Putin’s trip to Pyongyang “confirms the very close alignment between Russia and authoritarian states like North Korea” and stated that the West is “concerned about the potential support that Russia provides to North Korea when it comes to supporting their missile and nuclear programmes” (Butts 2024). The White House spokesperson Jean-Pierre told a news briefing that Russia and North Korea ties “should be of great concern to anyone interested in maintaining peace and stability in the Korean Peninsula” (Butts 2024).

Nonetheless, James Acton, co-director of the nuclear policy programme at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, stated, “the big picture here is how much Russia is re-evaluating its interests about a nuclear-armed North Korea” (Butts 2024). He asserted that Russia “might still not be ready to provide direct support for North Korea’s nuclear programme and was more likely to aid North Korea’s missile or submarine programmes.” (Butts 2024). Likewise, Choi Yonghwan asserted that the key purpose behind such developing ties is North Korea’s “own strategic

objectives” as Pyongyang is trying to “reshape the geopolitical landscape on the Korean Peninsula,” which is part of its foreign strategy described as ‘New Cold War Structure Utilisation Strategy’ (RUSI 2024). According to Yonghwan, the Ukraine war provided Kim with an opportunity to rely on Russia and China to “effectively paralyse any international effort to monitor breaches” of its UN sanctions (RUSI 2024). On the other hand, for Russia, the strengthening of ties with North Korea operates as a form of nuclear signalling, even if Pyongyang’s direct contribution is conventional. By invoking a partnership with another nuclear-armed state, Moscow amplifies the perception of a wider nuclear front aligned against the West. This creates additional deterrent pressure, reinforcing uncertainty over how far escalation dynamics could extend if the conflict deepens.

By invoking a partnership with another nuclear-armed state, Moscow amplifies the perception of a wider nuclear front aligned against the West. This creates additional deterrent pressure, reinforcing uncertainty over how far escalation dynamics could extend if the conflict deepens.

Thus, the partnership and deployment of troops have a psychological and political effect and signal the gradual emergence of a bloc of authoritarian states willing to support Russia’s war effort and undermine the West’s ability to isolate Moscow. It heightens the possibility of a new nuclear state alliance that could encompass North Korea, Belarus and Iran.

In this complex situation, the absence of reliable crisis management and communication channels between Russia and the West further elevates the risk of unintended escalation. It is unclear what comprises the red lines and when these would be crossed and what Russia’s resultant response would be. However, one thing that would certainly trigger significant nuclear escalation would be NATO’s decision to engage in direct military intervention in Ukraine and the latter’s membership of the alliance. Therefore, NATO has, so far, practised restraint and employed nuclear deterrence to avoid direct combat roles while providing Ukraine with sufficient support to defend itself as explained in the following section.

Ukraine conflict and nuclear deterrence: understanding the nuclear restraint

Nuclear deterrence, a strategic concept, provides deeper insights into why the threat of using nuclear weapons prevents adversaries from taking hostile actions. Relying on the principle of Mutually Assured Destruction (MAD), whereby nuclear attack from one party triggers a devastating retaliatory response from the other, it is clear that the potential use of nuclear weapons makes the cost of conflict unpredictably high. The early development of this theory came after the US dropped the first nuclear weapons at Hiroshima and Nagasaki in 1945. With that, the Soviet Union’s atomic test in 1949 ended the US monopoly and intensified the arms race. Thus, nuclear weapons became a weapon to deter.

Scholars like Bernard Brodie (1946) argue that the key role of nuclear weapons is “not to win conflicts but to prevent them.” Kenneth Waltz, likewise, notes that “the more states have nuclear weapons, the less likely are they to use them” (Guchua / Maisaia 2023: 129). Mearsheimer (1984-85: 20) further emphasises that “nuclear weapons, because of the horror associated with their use, really are the ultimate deterrent”. He argued that conventional forces can never have the same deterrent value as nuclear

weapons. According to him, “in the nuclear world, the danger associated with any conflict between the superpowers is so great that it becomes difficult for them to think about achieving political objectives by going to conflict against each other” (Mearsheimer 1984-85: 22).

This is evident during the Ukraine conflict where the nuclear potential of both sides restrained them from taking any action. According to a SIPRI 2024 report, the US has a military stockpile of around 3,708 nuclear weapons, out of which “1,770 were deployed (100 being tactical), while the rest remained in reserve or were waiting to be dismantled” (Kristensen et al. 2024). Russia, on the other hand, has around “4,380 warheads in its nuclear stockpile,” out of which “1,710 strategic warheads are deployed” (Kristensen et al. 2024). In this equation, French and British nuclear forces may “provide limited deterrence against conventional aggression” but “they provide more potent deterrence against nuclear use” and “offer a degree of cover for their forces if Russia decides to re-invade Ukraine, or if efforts to sustain Ukraine have to be stepped up because of increased Russian military pressure” (Freedman 2025).

Hence, the presence of such a massive stockpile of nuclear weapons creates a deterrence that prevents both sides from engaging in direct conflict which could lead to potential nuclear use. Though the conflict is causing massive casualties and physical and economic damage to Ukraine and Russia, both NATO (particularly the US, as a patron of Ukraine) and Moscow are constraining their behaviour. Some military movements might appear more attractive during the conflict; however, due to the fear of escalation, both sides are refraining from undertaking any action that could significantly escalate the conflict and lead to potential nuclear use. For instance, Russia has chosen not to attack the arms shipment of NATO countries en route to Ukraine, nor has it launched a direct attack on any NATO member, which would certainly escalate the situation. Despite Putin announcing the decision to put strategic forces on high readiness alert and his use of Iskandar M short-range ballistic missiles and Kinzhal hypersonic cruise missiles against Ukrainian targets, he did not order an attack on any NATO shipment due to the fear of nuclear escalation.

The presence of such a massive stockpile of nuclear weapons creates a deterrence that prevents both sides from engaging in direct conflict which could lead to potential nuclear use.

On the other hand, though the West imposed economic sanctions, it refrained from engaging directly in the Ukraine conflict and refused the deployments of troops on Ukrainian soil. The US was also initially hesitant to authorise the use of US-supplied ATACMS by Ukraine to launch attacks inside Russian territory due to fears of escalation (Vock 2024). In response to this hesitation and delays in the delivery of weapons to Ukraine, Oleksandra Ustinova, a Ukrainian member of parliament, stated,

“I have been hearing about nuclear escalation since the first day. First, it was, ‘if Ukraine gets MIGs from Poland, he is going to use nukes.’ Then it was the HIMARS, then Patriots, then tanks [...] It is like we are running behind the train. Every time we ask for something, we get it months or a year later, when it will not make as much of a difference as it would have before” (Bosco 2024).

Nonetheless, after North Korea was reported to be deploying around 11,000 to 12,000 troops in Russia, the then US Air Force

Major General Pat Ryder stated in November 2024 that “troops [who] engage in combat support operations against Ukraine” will become the “legitimate military targets” (Garamone 2024). Following this, the Biden administration lifted the ban on Ukraine’s use of long-range ATACMS missiles with a range of 190 miles (300 km) to launch attacks on targets inside Russian territory (Sabbagh 2024). In response, Putin emphasised that such actions indicate the Western nations’ “direct involvement” in armed conflict and Russia would respond to such “acts of aggression” (President of the Russian Federation 2024). On the other hand, despite being the top supplier of military equipment to Ukraine, Germany refused to supply the Taurus long-range missile to Ukraine with a strike range of over 500 km, due to escalation concerns (Mukhina 2025). Instead, in August 2025, Berlin announced that it would deliver two Patriot systems to Ukraine in the coming months, under an agreement with the United States stipulating that Germany would be first in line to receive the latest systems in return (Reuters 2025).

Thus, this “salami” or “learning by doing” tactics of the US, and NATO’s “provision of military aid to Ukraine, combined with a clear nuclear boundary around NATO territories and ambiguous messaging about escalation thresholds, creates a complex deterrent framework” (Holmes 2025: 27). It is due to this deterrence that despite Russia’s repeated threat to use nuclear weapons to deter Western support for Ukraine, no such weapons have been used. Moreover, when Moscow’s nuclear threats escalated, NATO reinforced its nuclear stance through strategic messaging and public warnings. For instance, in March 2022, Biden stated that NATO is “going to provide more support for Ukraine” and that it is ready to “defend every single inch of NATO territory with the full might of a united and galvanised NATO” (White House 2022). The then national security adviser to President Biden, Jake Sullivan, also warned Russia of “catastrophic consequences” if Moscow used nuclear weapons to hold territory in Ukraine (Sanger / Tankersley 2022). In March 2022, NATO announced its plans to place its rapid response forces, around 300,000 troops, on high alert (Sabbagh 2022).

However, to avoid escalation, Biden asserted that “direct confrontation between NATO and Russia is World War Three, something we must strive to prevent” (White House 2022). On another occasion, he stated: “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” (US Embassy in Ukraine 2022). Thus, statements and changes in NATO’s force posture demonstrated capability while carefully employing strategic ambiguity regarding the nuclear threshold, leaving their response to Russia’s escalation deliberately undefined, which created uncertainty among Russian leadership (Holmes 2025: 72-74).

The Russia-Ukraine conflict has restated the relevance of nuclear deterrence, which, so far, has prevented a direct military confrontation and a full-scale nuclear conflict between Russia and NATO. Nonetheless, the prospects of advancing US-Russia arms control were poor prior to the conflict and are even less promising today.

Thus, the Russia-Ukraine conflict has restated the relevance of nuclear deterrence, which, so far, has prevented a direct military confrontation and a full-scale nuclear conflict between Russia and NATO. Nonetheless, the prospects of advancing US-Russia arms

control were poor prior to the conflict and are even less promising today. The New START treaty, the last major arms control treaty between the US and Russia is due to expire in 2026; the chances of a new treaty being negotiated before the end of the year are slim. This agreement limited the US and Russia to 700 deployed intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBMs), submarine-launched ballistic missiles (SLBMs), and nuclear-equipped heavy bombers; 1,550 deployed nuclear warheads; and 800 deployed and non-deployed launchers and bombers (US Department of State 2023). The US demands future agreements to consider both Russia's strategic and non-strategic nuclear weapons, as well as China, whose growing arsenals are not constrained by any treaty. By contrast, Russia has demanded that any renewal of the New START treaty must include a broader strategic dialogue addressing US missile deployments in Europe and Western support for Ukraine. It insists that arms control cannot be separated from the overall security environment and mutual trust.

Consequently, the future of arms control and peace in Ukraine, which gave up its nuclear weapons in exchange for security assurances from the UK, Russia, and the US in 1994 under the Budapest Memorandum (Jakupec 2025), remains indistinct. President Donald Trump has further complicated the equation as discussed in the section below.

Shift in the US policy: Trump in power

The re-election of President Trump has marked a visible shift in the US's approach towards the Ukraine conflict. He has long criticised the Biden administration's support for Ukraine's NATO membership, asserting that the ignorance of "Russia's security concerns has contributed to the outbreak of Russo-Ukraine conflict" (Jakupec 2025: 44). Opposing the substantial scale of military aid to Ukraine by the US (estimated \$67 billion), Trump stated on 28 February 2025 that he has "no cards" and "effectively no choice" left but to "sue for peace with Russia" and paused all military and intelligence support to Ukraine (McGurk 2025). He further criticised Zelensky, calling him the "greatest salesman on Earth" (Leeson 2024).

Trump raised further concerns regarding the NATO allies' defence spending, affirming, "it is common sense, right [...] If they do not pay, I am not going to defend them" (Hunnicut / Brainstorm 2025). Consequently, NATO's Secretary General, Mark Rutte, has called for increased defence spending among NATO members, potentially up to 5% of the GDP, to address the issue of uneven burden sharing (Jakupec 2025: 51). In this regard, a 2025 report by RAND emphasised, the "shift in European defence spending has been accompanied by a new sense of urgency to improve Europe's ability to act alone by promoting greater cooperation and integration on defence and security" (Federick et al 2025: 36). Within a few weeks of the conflict, the EU also came up with its Strategic Compass for Security and Defence, a joint strategy which called for strengthening the Bloc's defence and building its resilience. Thus, the Ukraine conflict raised new questions regarding European security and compelled the leaders to reconsider the relations of modern interstate conflict and the tools available to defend against external threats.

Overall, Trump has stuck to his 'America First' Mantra and his focus is on ending the conflict, "regardless of which of the warring parties loses" (Jakupec 2025: 7). Nonetheless, he is facing issues as Moscow is insisting on Ukraine's denunciation of NATO's membership and recognition of the four oblasts (Donetsk, Kherson, Luhansk, and Zaporizhzhia) and Crimea as Russian territory,

while Ukraine is urging the alliance to accept Zelensky's 'Victory Plan', which focuses on restoration of Ukraine's territorial integrity, holding Russia accountable through international justice and post-conflict security guarantees (Jakupec 2025: 8). In such a complex situation, if Trump pursued a strategy of territorial compromise, it would have implications for Western unity and would raise questions about NATO's commitment to support Ukraine's sovereignty for as long as it takes.

The Ukraine conflict raises new questions regarding European security and compelled the leaders to reconsider the relations of modern interstate conflict and the tools available to defend against external threats.

To deal with this complexity, on 15 July 2025 Trump came up with new steps to pressure Russia to end the conflict. He warned Russia of severe economic punishment, asserting,

"We are going to be doing very severe tariffs if we do not have a deal in 50 days [...] Tariffs at about 100%, you would call them secondary tariffs. You know what that means [...] I use trade for a lot of things [...] it is great for settling conflicts" (Liptak 2025).

Matt Whitaker, the US ambassador to NATO, stated that the tariffs imply sanctions on countries buying oil from Russia, thereby impacting the Russian economy (Liptak 2025). However, Putin stressed that Russian economy is "strong enough to withstand the pressure of 100 percent tariffs" (The Telegraph 2025). Besides, Russia's foreign minister Sergei Lavrov dismissed Trump's threat of tariffs and stated that Moscow "had been through all of that before," adding that "Russia adapts to sanctions and will adapt to the new ones" (The Telegraph 2025). Deputy Foreign Minister Sergei Ryabkov noted that "any attempts to make demands, especially in the form of ultimatums, are unacceptable to us [Russia]" while indicating Moscow's readiness for peace talks (Metzel 2025).

President Trump is left with two options: to show indifference toward the conflict and abandon diplomacy while allowing Ukraine to lose ground or to reinforce diplomacy with a commitment to support Ukraine through military resupplies and impose additional costs on Putin if he chooses to continue the conflict.

Resultantly, on 7 September 2025 Moscow launched the largest-ever aerial assault on Ukraine, involving an estimated 810 drones and 13 missiles (Josephs / Hagan 2025). In response to this, President Trump stated that he "is not happy with the whole situation" and met with the EU's most senior sanctions envoy on September 8 to discuss further actions against Moscow (Rankin 2025). Meanwhile, Zelensky expressed his gratitude to the US, Germany, and Norway for their pledge to provide Ukraine with more air defence systems, including Patriots. Zelensky asserted that "Ukraine is ready for all honest and effective steps toward peace – lasting peace – and real security. It is Russia that is not ready. It is Russia that must be forced. And this is what is happening" (Zelensky 2025; Metzel 2025). Thus, President Trump is left with two options: one is to show indifference toward the conflict and abandon diplomacy while allowing Ukraine to lose ground. The other option is to reinforce diplomacy with a commitment to support Ukraine through military resupplies and impose

additional costs on Putin if he chooses to continue the conflict. Considering the situation on the ground, it appears that Trump opted for the second option, which is likely to increase the cost of conflict for Russia and eventually pressure it into agreeing to a ceasefire and a diplomatic settlement.

Conclusion and recommendations

More than three and a half years into the conflict, scholars are still fundamentally limited in evidence to suggest the dynamics of the conflict or to propose a clear path toward resolution. This is especially true when addressing the critical question at the heart of contemporary security debates: How can the Ukraine conflict be prevented from escalating to the nuclear level? Despite extensive analysis, no definitive solution has emerged. As Jervis (2021: 131-132) suggested “we are left uncertain of the answers to many key questions the nuclear era has raised”. It is difficult to explicate which particular action of the adversary might trigger nuclear escalation, and when and whether the red lines will ever be crossed. Who should be held responsible? What might happen if the nuclear threshold is crossed?

In all of this, EU member states are divided on whether they should fast-track Ukraine’s accession to the bloc, despite the growing defence cooperation with Ukraine. Moreover, the cost of supporting Ukraine has mounted, thereby creating new challenges for the member states. On the other hand, NATO has been reluctant to grant membership to states involved in active territorial disputes due to concerns of engaging the alliance in a conflict. Consequently, while NATO members had and would continue their efforts and support for Ukraine to advance progress towards its integration, making Ukraine a part of the NATO alliance seems disputed. Additionally, to say that Russia would leave its control over the five annexed Ukrainian oblasts is delusional. Neither are the prospects of Russian troops withdrawing to pre-conflict borders likely.

The lack of definitive solutions intensifies the risk of miscalculation and unintended escalation, making it imperative for regional actors to weigh their options carefully.

This uncertainty underscores the complexity of strategic decision-making in the current landscape. The lack of definitive solutions intensifies the risk of miscalculation and unintended escalation, making it imperative for regional actors to weigh their options carefully. In such a situation, Federick et al. (2025: 40) noted that the European community have four potential choices:

“abandon the prospects of Ukrainian integration, maintain the current approach of engagement without formal integration into collective political and security apparatuses, accelerate Ukraine’s integration by building a path to membership of NATO and EU, and push for rapid EU or NATO enlargement.” (Federick et al 2025: 40).

Nonetheless, each these options carries strategic risks, especially in terms of how Putin’s administration may perceive or respond to them.

Therefore, given the high stakes and chances of miscalculation, particularly with a nuclear dimension of the conflict, it is crucial to engage in robust crisis management mechanisms backed by multilateral diplomacy to prevent nuclear escalation in the Russia-Ukraine conflict. It is important to build direct military-to-military and political communication hotlines between

Ukraine, NATO, and Russia, which would help them reduce the risk of misinterpretation and the probabilities of escalation. It is also important to engage international actors, specifically the UN who can play a key role in facilitating dialogue and building confidence – measures between both sides. These CBMS, focusing specifically on nuclear risks such as notifications of military exercises involving nuclear-capable forces and transparency regarding the deployment of tactical nuclear weapons, can significantly help in evading nuclear provocations. More importance needs to be attributed to the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) review process and forums like the P5 nuclear dialogue. It is very crucial that the US, through the NATO alliance, clearly communicates a no-tolerance policy on any use of nuclear weapons by Russia.

Given the high stakes and chances of miscalculation, particularly with a nuclear dimension of the conflict, it is crucial to engage in robust crisis management mechanisms backed by multilateral diplomacy to prevent nuclear escalation in the Russia-Ukraine conflict.

Beyond traditional deterrence, a dedicated Nuclear Risk Reduction Taskforce could also be created to facilitate confidential back-channel communications between NATO and Russia, allowing real-time crisis management outside of media and political pressure. Likewise, halting the deployment of dual-use systems near contested borders – backed by third-party verification – could help further de-escalate tensions.

To conclude, the Russia-Ukraine conflict has significantly increased global anxiety regarding the potential use of nuclear weapons. Considerable update of nuclear doctrine and lowering the threshold for tactical nuclear use, combined with on-ground tensions, has created a tinderbox situation that requires a careful and calculated policy response. This paper stressed the dual necessity of both deterrence and diplomacy. While, maintaining credible nuclear deterrence is key to preventing Russia from taking any step that involves the use of nuclear weapons, diplomacy, on the other hand, help reduce misunderstanding and build a pathway towards preventing escalation. In the meantime, conventional arms support for Ukraine should continue to create a web of stability and prevent Ukraine from losing ground. Overall, the international community must act urgently and seek ways to preserve peace. Indisputably, preventing the Ukraine conflict from going nuclear hinges on the capacity of the NATO alliance to understand Russia’s nuclear doctrine and strategic signalling to avoid any chance of miscalculation while managing escalation risks proactively and fostering dialogue that reduces the flames of conflict. A balance between diplomacy and deterrence, strength and restraint will remain the cornerstone of survival in the nuclear age.

Endnotes

- 1 The primary focus of this article will be on intentional use of nuclear weapons; the risks associated with accidental nuclear explosions and nuclear testing is outside the article’s scope.
- 2 It must be noted that the US also follows a similar policy, as Belgium, Germany, Italy, the Netherlands, and Turkey all host a limited number of US nuclear bombs.
- 3 This article was written in July 2025 and revised in early September 2025. As such, subsequent developments may not be reflected.

References

- Al Jazeera (2022a): Biden says risk of 'nuclear Armageddon' highest in 60 years. <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2022/10/7/biden-says-nuclear-armageddon-risk-highest-in-60-years/>. Viewed 18 July 2025.
- Al Jazeera (2022b): Nuclear wars must not be fought, says China president Xi. <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2022/11/5/nuclear-wars-must-not-be-fought-says-china-president-xi/>. Viewed 19 July 2025.
- Arceneaux, Giles David (2023): Whether to worry: Nuclear weapons in the Russia-Ukraine conflict. In: Contemporary Security Policy, 44(4), 561-575.
- BBC News (17 June 2023): Ukraine conflict: Putin confirms first nuclear weapons moved to Belarus. <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-europe-65932700/>. Viewed 3 July 2025.
- Bell, Mark S. (2024): The Russia-Ukraine Conflict and Nuclear Weapons: Evaluating Familiar Insights. In: Journal for Peace and Nuclear Disarmament, 7(2), 494-508. <https://doi.org/10.1080/25751654.2024.2425379>.
- Blank, Stephen (2022): Nuclear weapons in Russia's conflict against Ukraine. In: Naval Conflict College Review, 75(4), 53-78.
- Bolt, Paul J. (2025): Strategic stability in a new era. In: International Studies, 6(1), 1-9.
- Bornu, Tonubari Zigha (2025): The Russian Ukrainian conflict; it's causes, background and effect. In: The American Journal of Political Science Law and Criminology, 7(5), 189-200. <https://doi.org/10.37547/tajpslc/Volume07Issue05-20>.
- Bosco, Joseph (9 March 2024): Biden must abandon his 'half-assed' Ukraine policy, before it's too late. In: The Hill. <https://thehill.com/opinion/white-house/4859580-biden-ukraine-weapons-support/>. Viewed 25 July 2025.
- Brodie, Bernard (1946): The absolute weapon: Atomic power and world order. New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company.
- Bugos, Shannon (2022): NATO, Russia Conduct Simultaneous Nuclear Exercises. Arms Control Association. <https://www.armscontrol.org/act/2022-11/news/nato-russia-conduct-simultaneous-nuclear-exercises/>. Viewed 10 July 2025.
- Butts, Dylan (19 June 2024): Russia and North Korea sign partnership deal that includes mutual defense pact, Putin says. CNBC. <https://www.cnn.com/2024/06/19/north-korea-rolls-out-the-red-carpet-for-putin.html>. Viewed 9 September 2025.
- Council of the European Union (24 February 2022): G7 Leaders' Statement on the invasion of Ukraine by armed forces of the Russian Federation. <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2022/02/24/g7-leaders-statement-on-the-invasion-of-ukraine-by-armed-forces-of-the-russian-federation/>. Viewed 6 July 2025.
- Faqir, Zahid (2022): The Emerging Geo-Political Disorder Post Russia-Ukraine Conflict (2022–2025 AD). In: Wah Academia Journal of Social Sciences, 4(1), 984-999.
- Freedman, Lawrence (2025): Europe's Nuclear Deterrent: The Here and Now. In: Survival: Global Politics and Strategy, 67(3), 7-24. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00396338.2025.2508078>.
- Garamone, Jim (4 November 2024): Pentagon Says 10K North Korean Troops in Kursk Oblast. The U.S. Department of War. <https://www.war.gov/News/News-Stories/Article/Article/3955757/pentagon-says-10k-north-korean-troops-in-kursk-oblast/>. Viewed 4 November 2024.
- Gierczak, Bartosz (2020): The Russo-Ukrainian Conflict. https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Bartosz-Gierczak/publication/349948624_The_Russo-Ukrainian_Conflict/links/6048d78c299bf1e0786d2493/The-Russo-Ukrainian-Conflict.pdf.
- Götz, Elias / Ekman, Per (2024): Russia's Conflict Against Ukraine: Context, Causes, and Consequences. In: Problems of Post-Communism, 71(3), 193-205.
- Guchua, Alike / Maisaia, Galaktion (2023): The threat of Using nuclear weapons in the 2022-2023 Russia-Ukraine Conflict. In: Józef Goluchowski University of Applied Sciences (ed.): Russo-Ukrainian Conflict 2022-? Origins, causes, course and effects, Conference paper, 121-139.
- Holmes, Riley Thomas (2025): The Role of Extended Nuclear Deterrence in the Russo-Ukrainian Conflict. Master's Thesis. Norwegian University of Science and Technology. <https://ntnu-opens.ntnu.no/ntnu-xmlui/bitstream/handle/11250/3182900/no.ntnu%3Ainspera%3A301398930%3A68725222.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y>.
- Hunnicutt, Trevor / Brunnstrom, David (7 March 2025): Trump: If NATO members don't pay, US won't defend them. Reuters. <https://www.reuters.com/world/trump-if-nato-members-dont-pay-us-wont-defend-them-2025-03-07/>. Viewed 27 July 2025.
- International Campaign to Abolish Nuclear Weapons (19 June 2023): Putin announces plans to deploy nuclear weapons in Belarus. <https://www.icanw.org/putin-announces-plans-to-deploy-nuclear-weapons-in-belarus/>. Viewed 20 July 2025.
- Jakupec, Viktor (2025): Trump-Proofing Ukraine Aid: NATO and EU Geopolitics. The West's Response to the Ukraine Conflict. In: Jakupec, Viktor (ed.): The West's Response to the Ukraine War. Berlin: Springer Nature, 9-62.
- Jervis, Robert (2021): The Nuclear Age: During and After the Cold Conflict. In: Monteiro, Nuno P. / Bartel, Fritz (eds.): Before and After the Fall: World Politics and the End of the Cold Conflict. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 115-131.
- Josephs, Jonathan / Hagan, Rachel (8 September 2025): Trump threatens tougher sanctions after Russia's heaviest strikes on Ukraine. BBC. <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/cwyrx205dj2o/>. Viewed 8 September 2025.

Kristensen, Hans M. / Korda, Matt / Frieß, Franziska et al. (2024): World nuclear forces. In: SIPRI Yearbook 2024: Armaments, Disarmament and International Security. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 271-367.

Kusa, Iliya (2022): Russia Ukraine Conflict: Harbinger of a Global Shift – A Perspective from Ukraine. In: Policy Perspectives, 19(1), 7-12.

Leeson, Lucy (25 September 2024): Trump labels Zelensky ‘greatest salesman on Earth’ in Russia conflict dig. In: The Independent. <https://www.independent.co.uk/tv/news/donald-trump-zelensky-russia-ukraine-conflict-b2618830.html>. Viewed 27 July 2025.

Lewis, Patricia (23 September 2022): How likely is the use of nuclear weapons by Russia? Chatham House. <https://www.chathamhouse.org/2022/03/how-likely-use-nuclear-weapons-russia/>. Viewed 17 July 2025.

Liptak, Kevin (14 July 2025): Trump announces novel plan to send weapons to Ukraine and gives Russia new deadline to make peace. CNN Politics. <https://edition.cnn.com/2025/07/14/politics/us-ukraine-weapons-trump/>. Viewed 27 July 2025.

Mbah, Ruth Endam / Wasum, Divine Forcha (2022): Russian-Ukraine 2022 Conflict: A Review of the Economic Impact of Russian-Ukraine Crisis on the USA, UK, Canada, and Europe. In: Advances in Social Sciences Research Journal, 9(3), 144-153.

McCurry, Justin / Roth, Andrew (19 June 2022): Russia and North Korea sign mutual defence pact. In: The Guardian. https://www.theguardian.com/world/article/2024/jun/19/russia-and-north-korea-sign-mutual-defence-pact?utm_source=chatgpt.com. Viewed 9 September 2025.

McGurk, Brett H. (15 July 2025): Trump’s new stance toward Russia changes the calculus in Ukraine. Why now? CNN Politics. <https://edition.cnn.com/2025/07/15/politics/trumps-ukraine-pivot-mcgurk-analysis/>. Viewed 26 July 2025.

Mearsheimer, John (2014): Why the Ukraine Crisis Is the West’s Fault: The Liberal Delusions That Provoked Putin. In: Foreign Affairs, 93(5), 77-84.

Mearsheimer, John (1984-85): Nuclear weapons and deterrence in Europe. In: International Security, 9(3), 19-46. <https://muse.jhu.edu/article/446100>.

Melvin, Neil (2 March 2022): Nationalist and Imperial Thinking Define Putin’s Vision for Russia. Royal United Services Institute (RUSI). <https://rusi.org/explore-our-research/publications/commentary/nationalist-and-imperial-thinking-define-putins-vision-russia/>. Viewed 12 July 2025.

Metzel, Mikhail (15 July 2025): We Don’t Care: Russian Officials, Media React to Trump’s Ukraine Conflict Ultimatum. In: The Moscow Times. <https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2025/07/15/we-dont-care-russian-officials-media-react-to-trumps-ukraine-conflict-ultimatum-a89819/>. Viewed: 28 July 2025.

Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation (2022): Press release on submitting a written reaction to the US response concerning security guarantees. https://www.mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/news/1799157/. Viewed 13 July 2025.

Mukhina, Olena (12 July 2025): Germany refuses to send Taurus missiles but funds hundreds of Ukrainian-made long-range strike systems. Euromaidan Press. <https://euromaidanpress.com/2025/07/12/germany-refuses-to-send-taurus-missiles-but-funds-hundreds-of-ukrainian-made-long-range-strike-systems/>. Viewed 25 July 2025.

NATO (12 July 2020): NATO recognises Ukraine as Enhanced Opportunities Partner. https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/news_176327.html. Viewed 12 July 2025.

President of the Russian Federation (28 November 2024): Answers to media questions. <http://www.en.kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/75689/>. Viewed 8 September 2025.

President of the Russian Federation (24 February 2022): Address by the President of the Russian Federation. <https://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/67843/>. Viewed 3 July 2025.

Reuters (1 August 2025): Germany to deliver two Patriot systems to Ukraine in deal with US. <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/germany-deliver-two-patriot-systems-ukraine-deal-with-us-2025-08-01/>. Viewed 8 September 2025.

Rankin, Jennifer (8 September 2025): EU and US officials meet as Trump says he is ready to impose further sanctions on Russia. In: The Guardian. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2025/sep/08/eu-and-us-officials-meet-as-trump-says-he-is-ready-to-impose-further-sanctions-on-russia/>. Viewed 8 September 2025.

Roth, Andrew / Walker, Shaun / Rankin, Jennifer et al. (25 February 2022): Putin signals escalation as he puts Russia’s nuclear force on high alert. In: The Guardian. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/feb/27/vladimir-putin-puts-russia-nuclear-deterrence-forces-on-high-alert-ukraine/>. Viewed 14 July 2025.

Sabbagh, Dan (17 November 2024): Biden lifts ban on Ukraine using US weapons to strike deeper into Russia. In: The Guardian. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2024/nov/17/biden-has-lifted-ban-on-ukraine-using-us-weapons-to-strike-deeper-into-russia-reports/>. Viewed 8 September 2025.

Sabbagh, Dan (27 June 2022): Nato to put 300,000 troops on high alert in response to Russia threat. In: The Guardian. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/jun/27/nato-300000-troops-high-alert-russia-threat-ukraine/>. Viewed 26 July 2025.

Sabbagh, Dan (2 December 2021): Russia’s activity on the Ukraine border has put the west on edge. In: The Guardian. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/dec/02/ukraine-border-russia-west-troop-buildup/>. Viewed 12 July 2025.

Sagan, Scott D. (14 October 2022): How to Keep the Ukraine Conflict From Going Nuclear. In: The Wall Street Journal. <https://www.wsj.com/articles/how-to-keep-the-ukraine-conflict-from-going-nuclear-11665761260/>. Viewed 8 September 2025.

Sanger, David E. / Tankersley, Jim (25 September 2022): US warns Russia of ‘Catastrophic Consequences’ if it uses nuclear weapons. In: The New York Times. <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/09/25/us/politics/us-russia-nuclear.html>. Viewed 25 July 2025.

Sky News (1 June 2022): Biden to send missile system to Ukraine in U-turn and issues nuclear warning to Russia. Sky News. <https://news.sky.com/story/biden-to-send-missile-system-to-ukraine-in-u-turn-and-issues-nuclear-conflicting-to-russia-12625079/>. Viewed 19 July 2025.

Sokov, Nikolai N (8 March 2022): Russian military doctrine calls a limited nuclear strike “de-escalation.” Here’s why. In: Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists. <https://thebulletin.org/2022/03/russian-military-doctrine-calls-a-limited-nuclear-strike-de-escalation-heres-why/>. Viewed 22 July 2025.

Szumski, Charles (31 March 2022): Russian jets carrying nuclear weapons violated Swedish airspace. Euractiv. https://www.euractiv.com/section/politics/short_news/russian-jets-carrying-nuclear-weapons-violated-swedish-airspace/. Viewed 17 July 2025.

Talmadge, Caitlin (26 April 2022): Putin just tested a new long-range missile. What does that mean? Brookings. <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/putin-just-tested-a-new-long-range-missile-what-does-that-mean/>. Viewed 17 July 2025.

TASS (19 November 2024): Amendments to Russia’s nuclear doctrine practically formulated, Kremlin Spokesman says. <https://tass.com/politics/1874313/>. Viewed 25 July 2025.

TASS (12 October 2022): Ukraine’s joining NATO can lead to World Conflict III – Russia’s Security Council. <https://tass.com/politics/1521961/>. Viewed 14 July 2025.

Tétrault Farber, Gabrielle / Balmforth, Tom (17 December 2021): Russia demands NATO roll back from East Europe and stay out of Ukraine. Reuters. <https://www.reuters.com/world/russia-unveils-security-guarantees-says-western-response-not-encouraging-2021-12-17/>. Viewed 12 July 2025.

The Telegraph (15 July 2025): Putin vows to keep fighting despite Trump threats. <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/world-news/2025/07/15/ukraine-russia-conflict-trump-putin-zelensky-latest-news/>. Viewed 28 July 2025.

TheWhiteHouse(19May2023):G7Leaders’StatementonUkraine. <https://bidenwhitehouse.archives.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2023/05/19/g7-leaders-statement-on-ukraine/>. Viewed 20 July 2025.

U.S. Department of State (2012): Arms Control Issues: The New START Treaty. U.S. Department of State, Office of Arms Control and Non Proliferation. <https://2009-2017.state.gov/documents/organization/176158.pdf>.

U.S. Embassy & Consulates in Italy (8 March 2022): Remarks by President Biden Announcing U.S. Ban on Imports of Russian Oil, Liquefied Natural Gas, and Coal. <https://it.usembassy.gov/remarks-by-president-biden-announcing-u-s-ban-on-imports-of-russian-oil-liquefied-natural-gas-and-coal/>. Viewed 6 July 2025.

U.S. Embassy in Ukraine (1 June 2022): President Biden on Staying the Course in Ukraine. The U.S. Embassy in Ukraine. <https://ua.usembassy.gov/president-biden-on-staying-the-course-in-ukraine/>. Viewed 26 July 2025.

Umland, Andreas (2018): The 2018–19 Russian and Ukrainian Election Cycles and the Conflict in the Donbas. In: Harvard International Review, 39(4), 36–41.

Vasilyeva, Nataliya (21 September 2022): I’m not bluffing on nuclear weapons, Putin warns West. In: The Telegraph. <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/world-news/2022/09/21/putin-calls-300000-reservists-partial-mobilisation/>. Viewed 18 July 2025.

Vock, Ido (18 November 2024): ATACMS: What we know about missile system Ukraine could use to strike Russia. BBC News. <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/cx2nrlq1840o/>. Viewed 25 July 2025.

Walt, Stephen M. (19 January 2022): Liberal Illusions Caused the Ukraine Crisis. In: Foreign Policy. <https://foreignpolicy.com/2022/01/19/ukraine-russia-nato-crisis-liberal-illusions/>. Viewed 13 July 2025.

White House (11 March 2022): Remarks by President Biden Announcing Actions to Continue to Hold Russia Accountable. <https://bidenwhitehouse.archives.gov/briefing-room/speeches-remarks/2022/03/11/remarks-by-president-biden-announcing-actions-to-continue-to-hold-russia-accountable/>. Viewed 25 July 2025.

Yonghwan, Choi (4 December 2024): The Meaning and Significance of North Korean Troops’ Deployment to Russia. RUSI. <https://www.rusi.org/explore-our-research/publications/commentary/meaning-and-significance-north-korean-troops-deployment-russia/>. Viewed 9 September 2025.

Zelensky, Volodymyr (14 July 2025): Tweet. On X. <https://x.com/ZelenskyyUa/status/1944833457622016479>.



At the time of writing, Ayesha Zafar was pursuing an Erasmus Mundus joint master’s in Security, Intelligence, and Strategic Studies at the University of Glasgow as a recipient of the prestigious Erasmus Mundus scholarship. She has worked with multiple research institutes, gaining experience in geopolitical risk analysis, threat assessment, and broader areas of security and strategic affairs. Recently, she contributed to projects with the German Institute for International and Security Affairs (SWP) and the Peace Research Centre Prague (PRCP), focusing on the Russia-Ukraine war and emerging nuclear rhetoric.

Email: ayeshazafar100@hotmail.com