



Nuclear Implications of the Russia-Ukraine Conflict



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Russia-Ukraine conflict is close to completing two months. During this period, President Putin has resorted to unambiguous and explicit nuclear signalling. In fact, even before Russia started the military operation against Ukraine, Putin oversaw elaborate nuclear exercises on February 19, 2022. Then, on just the fourth day of the invasion, he announced that he was raising nuclear alert levels by imposing a 'special regime of combat duty'. There have been reports of the deployment of nuclear submarines from the Northern Fleet. Indeed, the Russian attempt has been to repeatedly draw attention to the nuclear capability and status of the country and to the likelihood of "consequences you have never seen in history" in case of outside intervention into the conflict.

Such statements and actions appear to be in keeping with Russia's stated nuclear doctrine. The purpose of nuclear weapons is to deter the US/NATO from stepping into or expanding the conflict in ways that Russia does not desire, such as the imposition of no-fly zones, etc. India has had experience of such nuclear brinkmanship in its own crises with Pakistan, where, in order to deter a conventional response from India, Islamabad showed a propensity to hype the threat of nuclear escalation early in a crisis. These nuclear noises are meant to deter India as well as get the international community scared enough to want to quickly intervene and restrain Indian retaliatory action in response to provocations.

Russia, too, has been signalling an escalate-to-de-escalate strategy along similar lines, backed by its 1900 'tactical' nuclear weapons, to underline its own resolve and to get the West

to back down. The greater risk from such strategies of brinkmanship that rely on heightened alert levels is that of inadvertent nuclear escalation. This is exacerbated by the presence of a vicious disinformation campaign and a thick fog of war. Therefore, the possibility of nuclear use due to misperception, miscalculation, or even unauthorised action poses a real danger.

The ongoing Russia-Ukraine conflict will have implications for both nuclear non-proliferation and nuclear disarmament, irrespective of how this conflict is resolved. The impact on both nuclear dimensions will be based on how perceptions on two issues shape up in the coming months and years: a) on the perceived value of nuclear weapons; b) on the acceptability threshold of nuclear risks.

On the first issue of the political utility of nuclear weapons, seeing Russian behaviour, a view is gaining popularity that countries with nuclear weapons can act with impunity, especially against non-nuclear-weapon states (NNWS). This view will prompt NNWS to re-evaluate their own security imperatives, especially where they face hostile nuclear weapon possessors. It is not surprising that some voices in Japan and South Korea have begun to argue in favour of possessing their own nuclear weapons. Nuclear sharing under NATO or the American nuclear umbrella is likely to assume a new significance. There is a strong likelihood that voices in favour of the withdrawal of US nuclear weapons from the five countries in Europe will be muted. More, in fact, may want to acquire them. It may be recalled that Belarus has already amended its constitution after a referendum on February 27, 2022, to allow Russia to station its weapons on its soil.

Therefore, the conflict and Russia's behaviour will erode the sense of security of the NNWS, including their faith in negative security assurances, where these have been grudgingly provided by the NWS. Concerns to this effect will be heard at the NPT RevCon now scheduled for August 2022, and this divide between the two kinds of states will only grow. How this is handled will influence the future course of nuclear non-proliferation.

The second issue of how nations perceive the risks of nuclear weapons will have implications for nuclear disarmament. The Cuban missile crisis that happened 60 years ago made both sides realise what it was like to be on the edge of a nuclear precipice. Both drew

back suitably chastened, and it triggered a shared understanding of nuclear risks, leading to a shared desire to establish strategic stability. Will a similar realisation dawn once again?

This appears less likely in 2022 given the current reality where different nuclear weapon possessors evaluate the utility of nuclear risks differently. In any case, unlike the bipolar situation in 1962, the present nuclear landscape is dotted with many states possessing nuclear weapons, each demonstrating a different nuclear risk sensibility. Countries like Russia, China, and Pakistan think risks are good for nuclear deterrence. Therefore, they do not hesitate to follow strategies that raise the dangers of entanglement of conventional and nuclear realms. In the absence of a common desire to address the risks of nuclear weapons, the world may move away from nuclear disarmament as nations accept a willingness to live with the nuclear risks.

The ongoing conflict has resulted in unimaginable suffering caused by the loss of hundreds and displacement of millions of human lives. Another major casualty from the international security point of view has been the joint statement by the P-5 that they announced in January this year. The sense of optimism this had generated through a collective expression of the belief that nuclear war cannot be won and should not be fought has fast dissipated.

The risk of nuclear war remains in the air. In these circumstances, it is inevitable that the prospects of non-proliferation and nuclear disarmament will face turbulent times ahead.

(Disclaimer: The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the position of the Centre for Air Power Studies [CAPS])

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