

## Opinion – Reducing Nuclear Fears to Negotiate a Winning Peace in Ukraine

Written by Paul Alexander

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<https://www.e-ir.info/2023/12/12/opinion-reducing-nuclear-fears-to-negotiate-a-winning-peace-in-ukraine/>

PAUL ALEXANDER, DEC 12 2023

Ukraine's most senior general describes their counter-offensive as stalemate. They need innovation, by which he means more advanced US weaponry. This to a US Congress growing in resistance, as election campaigning ramps up and the Middle East crisis evolves. Ukraine is getting (second-generation) ATACMS, F-16 planes and Leopard tanks. Germany has committed 7bn euros more military aid. However, France's Macron isn't alone in speaking of the inevitability of 'fair and good' negotiations. What power would Ukraine have negotiating now? The reality is that any leverage starts with battlefield gains. Facing three-line defences, with little air cover, was always an extreme challenge. Experts now routinely admit what few dared a year ago: Western weapons have been enough for Ukraine neither to lose or win.

Why? At least in part, concern for nuclear escalation. Ukraine might use advanced weapons to more severely attack Russia. An 'irresponsible use'. Or responsibly, and effectively, use them to make surprising Ukraine gains – especially Crimea – risking unthinkable escalation. Experts less routinely admit this, whilst accepting the nuclear shadow shapes arms given. Jake Sullivan recently went further. For him losing Crimea is his imagined Putin nuclear redline, one made real as strikes forced Russia to relocate some of its fleet to Novorossiysk.

Putin using nuclear weapons, even if desperate and just a low yield 'demonstration', is both unthinkable and unlikely. His Chinese 'ally' alone would disavow it, and probably Putin. Why such fear of something so low risk? The obvious answer is high consequences, even if a warning shot. It breaks the nuclear taboo. War games arrive at horror scenarios if the West's reply is too strong. If it's weak, disunited, the value of nuclear weapons increases along with that of their proliferation. Then there's Belarus: will firing warheads from there automatically widen war?

Regardless of likelihood, the threat is credible. Experts debate if using tactical nuclear weapons first, 'escalate to de-escalate' to halt a war, is Russian military doctrine. Either way non-strategic warheads are integrated across land, sea and air. The order can be carried out. They have local, and national RT, media control that either doesn't report or spins civilian attacks. RT also seem to groom their audience for nuclear use (so far unsuccessfully). Virtual nuclear tests, and Armageddon threats to the UK, extend horror thoughts to Western peoples. Their police state arrest leaders of 'not in my name' protests, which pliant courts convict. This deepens their 'atrocious power', a licence which extends to public nuclear threats. The US spelled out to him the 'catastrophic consequences' from using nuclear weapons. In private.

Graham Allison argues the West lacks a policy to either deter or answer Russian nuclear use, or the threat of it. Among the few to suggest one is former NSA Russia Director Jeffrey Edmonds. The first two, of four, options are do nothing or go nuclear. Both unconscionable. The third, continued undeterred support for Ukraine, may be too business as usual. The fourth, Western conventional attacks on Russian assets, might only fuel Putin's 'war against the West' narratives. Especially useful if losing, maybe giving licence to further escalation. Is there a fifth option? Deterrence is an implicit negotiation, but one offering what the counterparty least wants. Ideally you offer what you most want to too – it helps credibility as you might have to do it.

What would Putin least want, and the West most want to offer? He would least want a united, advanced, commitment

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for more funding. A combined pledge of say \$40bn. Enough to solidify gains, offer more battlefield defeat, whilst containing war to Ukraine and Ukrainians. The outcome Putin can least spin as direct war with the West.

A pledge publicly targets the power of Putin's threats. His media, military and elites will see he chose this. Will war criticism increase, even on RT, with unrest at scales hard to police away? Will his command chain decide this war's existential just for him? He will be weaker. This mechanism lowers nuclear threat's power by pre-answering it. Its background hum has affected responsible decision-makers. A pledge moves the hum to the foreground, amplifying it to reduce its noise. A military, and moral, redline and template for future nuclear theatres. It is insurance, underwriting nuclear use. Payment only if the event. Unlike insurance, the policy alone may reduce the event's probability. This 'deterrent fund' can deter, manage escalation, disincentive proliferation and support negotiation: sellable to hawks and doves.

The US can lead, or follow, pledges for this contingency fund whilst influencing the private negotiation. US Presidents don't like being painted into corners. This can paint them out of one. It still leaves all other options on the table, especially if nuclear use is more egregious. Western countries formally agreeing their pledges through law will embed unity. Passing it through legislatures will signal the power of democracies. Laws are harder to pass but also to revoke. Including for incoming US Presidents, and especially if supported by public opinion.

Experts increasingly advocate a new strategy: to contain, and pressure, Russia. This accepts that retaking huge swathes of land, and regime change, are unlikely. Casualties can reduce, and money better spent through longer range weapons (e.g. Taurus). The pledge enables this. Why now? Support is at a crossroads, while Putin awaits Trump. This 'free' initiative adds to the case for more advanced support whilst managing escalation as Gaza unfolds. The pledge, and arms, might change Putin's calculations and expectations. Not if cornered, but now too.

Neither Putin, nor Zelensky, currently have the will – or political room – to make concessions for a real negotiation. Neither are 'ripe'. This containment strategy, if fully supported, might alter both sides' pictures of the future. Potentially accelerating this ripeness and saving lives. This strategy needs longer range weapons, and so reducing the nuclear shadow (regardless of its improbability). The 'deterrent fund' can support this, whilst pre-containing escalation to Ukraine. A public, pre-negotiated, show of unity which even a re-elected Trump might not easily reverse.

We can neither afford Ukraine to lose, nor to have a losing peace. They need a credible alternative to a bad deal, to walk away and keep fighting more effectively at less cost. A new mechanism which could gain them leverage for a settlement that really can be fair and good.

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## About the author:

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