

**A RATIONAL
CHOICE?
RUSSIA'S POTENTIAL
USE OF NONSTRATEGIC
NUCLEAR WEAPONS**

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Limited employment of nonstrategic nuclear weapons (NSNW) is becoming an increasingly rational choice for Russian President Vladimir Putin in Russia's ongoing war against Ukraine. Three propositions have enabled the current situation. First, the United States and its NATO Allies have transmitted a message of strategic ambiguity regarding a kinetic Western response to Russian employment of NSNW. The second proposition, based on Western perceptions and his own belief, is that if Russia loses the war, Putin will fall from power. The final proposition is that due to the military, economic, and reputational degradation resulting from the war, Russia will lose its great power status. The United States should better scope its strategic messaging to convey firm resolve to deliver military consequences in the event Putin decides to break the nuclear taboo and deploy such weapons.

Limited employment of nonstrategic nuclear weapons (NSNW) is becoming an increasingly rational choice for Russia in its war against Ukraine. Although unlikely to turn the tide of battle or achieve the political objective of conquering Ukraine, limited NSNW use could still prove Russian mettle and allow it to maintain its place on the world stage.¹ As the long-awaited Ukrainian counteroffensive progresses, NSNWs could serve as a restorative shock of sorts, allowing President Vladimir Putin to signal to the United States, his greatest existential threat, that Russia remains a great power regardless of the outcome of the war in Ukraine.

This study examines three propositions that make Putin increasingly likely to use nonstrategic nuclear weapons in some manner: strategic ambiguity on the part of the United States and its NATO Allies' formal and informal messaging regarding punishment for nuclear use; a belief on the part of the West and of Putin himself that if Russia loses the war, he will lose power; and the proposition that because of the war's effects on the Russian military, economy and global reputation, Russia is no longer a great power. By employing prospect theory and its understanding of framing—which evaluates an actor's perceptions of alternative courses of action, the outcomes, and the probabilities of those outcomes—this article demonstrates that if Putin internalizes these propositions, his decision to use nonstrategic nuclear weapons becomes increasingly rational.

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How Possibilities of Loss Shape Perceptions of Risk

The tenets of prospect theory, developed from behavioral economics, are well known: in general, humans will risk more to avoid loss than to achieve positive gains.² Because people are “generally risk-averse with respect to gains and risk-acceptant with respect to losses,” this can lead to instability in the international arena.³

A state which perceives itself to be in a deteriorating situation might be willing to take excessively risky actions in order to maintain the status quo against further deterioration, even if a standard probability calculus based on expected value would lead to a preference for restraint. This would be particularly likely if the state perceived that the further deterioration in its position were certain, or if its position had already deteriorated and the state wanted to recover those losses.⁴

Prospect theory has strong insights for international relations, particularly when states are treated as relatively unitary actors subject to a certain leader’s will. Granted, even in the most autocratic states, a leader shares power with an elite group.⁵ But those states still have a central leader with an outsized ability to shape that state’s actions, particularly in the case of nonroutine, singular decisions.⁶ Starting a war, regardless of it being called a “special military operation,” and employing nuclear weapons are two examples of singular decisions in the Russian system that fall within Putin’s responsibilities.⁷

The Specter of Nonstrategic Nuclear Weapons

Russian warnings about using nuclear weapons have directly shaped the battlefield in Ukraine. Russia’s strategic nuclear exercises incorporating various missile launches, including ballistic missiles, concluded a few days prior to its invasion.⁸ Then, in his speech announcing the “special military operation” on February 24, 2022, Putin stated, “No matter who tries to stand in our way or all the more so create threats for

2. Amos Tversky and Daniel Kahneman, “Advances in Prospect Theory: Cumulative Representation of Uncertainty,” *Journal of Risk and Uncertainty* 5, no. 4 (1992), <https://www.jstor.org/>.

3. Jack S. Levy, “An Introduction to Prospect Theory,” *Political Psychology* 13, no. 2 (1992): 174, <https://www.jstor.org/>.

4. Jack S. Levy, “Prospect Theory and International Relations: Theoretical Applications and Analytical Problems,” *Political Psychology* 13, no. 2 (1992): 286, <https://www.jstor.org/>.

5. Brandon J. Kinne, “Decision Making in Autocratic Regimes: A Poliheuristic Perspective,” *International Studies Perspectives* 6, no. 1 (2005), <http://www.jstor.org/>.

6. Daniel L. Byman and Kenneth M. Pollack, “Let Us Now Praise Great Men: Bringing the Statesman Back In,” *International Security* 25, no. 4 (2001), <http://www.jstor.org/>.

7. Kremlin, “Address by President of the Russian Federation,” President of Russia, February 24, 2022, <http://en.kremlin.ru/>; and Kristin Ven Bruusgaard, “How Russia Decides to Go Nuclear,” *Foreign Affairs*, February 6, 2023, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/>.

8. Tom Balmforth and Maria Kiselyova, “Putin Leads Sweeping Nuclear Exercises and Tensions Soar,” Reuters, February 19, 2022, <https://www.reuters.com/>.

our country and our people, they must know that Russia will respond immediately, and the consequences will be such as you have never seen in your entire history.”⁹

Following the disastrous beginnings of the invasion, Putin announced that he had put Russia’s nuclear forces on “high alert.”¹⁰ And nuclear posturing has continued since then: in October 2022, Russian news agency TASS reported Russia had warned the UN secretary-general that Ukraine was planning a “dirty bomb” attack, pleading for help in preventing this act of nuclear terrorism from taking place. These claims were repeated by Russian Minister of Defence Sergei Shoigu to his counterparts from the United States, United Kingdom, and France, among other countries.¹¹ These accusations, which many in the West interpreted as a possible cover for a Russian false-flag attack, took place alongside Russian annual nuclear drills involving intercontinental ballistic missiles, submarines, and strategic bombers.

In February 2023, shortly after the US State Department announced that Russia was in violation of the New Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (New START), Putin suspended Russian participation in the treaty and announced that “new ground-based strategic systems” were going to be placed on combat duty.¹² About a month after withdrawing from New START, Putin stated he would be sending tactical nuclear weapons to Belarus, which Russia did in late May.¹³

Skeptics of these threats argue Russia’s declarations are “primarily political posturing unrelated to any probable nuclear use,” and claim Western overreaction is what renders the threats effective forms of intimidation.¹⁴ After all, Russian actors have made such threats for years, such as in 2015, when warning Denmark it would become a nuclear target if it joined NATO’s missile defense system, or in 2018, when in his state of the union address Putin boasted about Russia’s new nuclear systems and shared a simulation showing a Sarmat intercontinental ballistic missile on its way to Florida, avoiding US missile defense systems.¹⁵

9. Kremlin, “Address”; and Max Fisher, “Putin’s Case for War, Annotated,” *New York Times*, February 24, 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/>.

10. Andrew Roth et al., “Putin Signals Escalation as He Puts Russia’s Nuclear Forces on High Alert,” *Guardian*, February 27, 2022, <https://www.theguardian.com/>.

11. “Russia Urging UN Chief to Prevent ‘Dirty Bomb’ Provocation,” TASS, October 24, 2022, <https://tass.com/>.

12. Guy Faulconbridge, “Russia’s Putin Issues New Nuclear Warnings to West over Ukraine,” Reuters, February 21, 2023, <https://www.reuters.com/>; and Heather Williams, “Critical Questions: Russia Suspends New START and Increases Nuclear Risks,” Center for Strategic and International Studies, February 23, 2023, <https://www.csis.org/>.

13. Guy Faulconbridge, “Russia Moves ahead with Deployment of Tactical Nukes in Belarus,” Reuters, May 25, 2023, <https://www.reuters.com/>.

14. Valeriy Akimenko, “Myth 6: Russia’s Nuclear Threats are Real and Should be Taken Literally,” in “Myths and Misconceptions around Russian Military Intent,” Chatham House (website), August 23, 2022, <https://www.chathamhouse.org/>.

15. Elisabeth Braw, “Behind Putin’s Nuclear Threats,” *Politico EU*, August 18, 2015, <https://www.politico.eu/>; and Steven Pifer, “Putin on the Nukes,” Brookings, March 2, 2018, <https://www.brookings.edu/>.

If these threats are simply political posturing, even increasingly dramatic warnings from Russia should be ignored and played down in discussions of escalation.¹⁶ Western observers expressed skepticism when, as Russian forces were thrown into disarray by the successful Ukrainian counteroffensive in September 2022, Putin stated to the West that those planning to use weapons of mass destruction against Russia needed to remember that Russia itself had such weapons and would use all means to protect itself. His caveat—“this is not a bluff”—only served to undermine his claim.¹⁷

Other analysts in the West are less sanguine and believe that nuclear threats from Russia may signal actual intent. At the popular level, sales of iodine—a prophylactic against harmful radiation—across Europe substantially increased beginning in February 2022.¹⁸ As the war began, US intelligence community leaders assessed that providing certain military systems such as the MiG-29 would be “too escalatory.”¹⁹ Defense-related commentary included alarming claims. One foreign relations expert noted that Washington and Moscow “are locked in an escalatory cycle that, along current trends, will eventually bring them into direct conflict and then go nuclear, killing millions of people and destroying much of the world.”²⁰ Adding to these concerns are studies suggesting that the nuclear taboo may be overstated and could be broken depending on political and material circumstances.²¹ As one political analyst noted in 2022, “There is a whiff of nuclear forgetting in the air.”²²

Messaging as a Potential Trigger

This study is an attempt to better understand Russia’s nuclear posturing vis-à-vis Ukraine by exploring specific messaging that makes the use of NSNW a rational choice for Putin. The United States and other Western states have, even from early in the war, heightened the stakes for Putin by explicitly discussing the threats to his own regime and himself if the war should be lost. As Russia’s military performance has continued to stumble, prospect theory suggests a massive risk to avert losses will become

16. Anya Loukianova Fink and Olga Olikier, “Russia’s Nuclear Weapons in a Multipolar World,” *Daedalus* 149, no. 2 (2020): 45, <https://www.jstor.org/>.

17. Keir Giles, “Putin is Admitting His Previous Threats Were Hollow by Saying ‘This Is Not a Bluff,’” *Guardian*, September 21, 2022, <https://www.theguardian.com/>; and see also Anne Applebaum, “Fear of Nuclear War Has Warped the West’s Ukraine Strategy,” November 7, 2022, <https://www.theatlantic.com/>.

18. Karel Kostev, Susanne Abeler, and Ai Koyanagi, “Research Letter: Sales of Iodine-Containing Drugs in Europe following the Beginning of the War between Russia and Ukraine,” *JAMA Network Open* 5, no. 10 (October 27, 2022), <https://jamanetwork.com/>.

19. *Open Hearing: 2022 Annual Worldwide Threat Assessment of the U.S. Intelligence Community*, S. Hrg. 117-307 (video recording, 02:56), March 10, 2022, <https://www.intelligence.senate.gov/>.

20. Jeremy Shapiro, “We Are on a Path to Nuclear War,” *War on the Rocks*, October 12, 2022, <https://warontherocks.com/>.

21. T. V. Paul, “Taboo or Tradition? The Non-Use of Nuclear Weapons in World Politics,” *Review of International Studies* 36, no. 4 (2010), <https://www.jstor.org/>.

22. Nina Tannenwald, “Is Using Nuclear Weapons Still Taboo?,” *Foreign Policy*, July 1, 2022, <https://foreignpolicy.com/>.

increasingly appealing to Putin.²³ If the war is about to be lost, with all its attendant dire consequences, why not overturn the chessboard and see what happens?

Putin may be bluffing with his nuclear hand, but if not, the strategic planning approach of backcasting will help contextualize events that could lead to his employment of nuclear weapons. In backcasting, one begins with a future state—in this case, from the point of an undesirable future—and then traces backward to see how such a situation could develop.²⁴ The backcasting method applied in this article is not concerned with battlefield developments that might lead Putin to use NSNW in Ukraine, but rather what messages or signals could have encouraged Russian nuclear use in the imagined future state, and thus, how to avoid sending them today.

According to prospect theory—which determines how people choose among options that involve probability and uncertainty—the framing of decisions is linked to three elements of a choice: how an actor perceives courses of action, the outcomes that can be associated with those alternatives, and the probabilities associated with each particular outcome.²⁵ In this case, prospect theory suggests explicit US messaging to Russia as well as the implicit messages from battlefield results have placed Putin in a situation in which, despite the risks, the costs of using NSNW have been lowered, while the possibility of a positive outcome following NSNW use has been increased.

Russia's employment of NSNW could allow the country to potentially regain its status as an unpredictable actor to be feared and respected by other states, despite its military's poor performance in Ukraine. Three propositions in the form of two explicit messages and one implicit message have forged Russian perceptions about NSNW use: first, that there may or may not be serious consequences if Putin employs them; second, that the consequences for losing the war in Ukraine will be threatening for Putin; and finally, the implicit message that if matters continue their current trajectory Russia will lose its great power status.

Predicting NSNW Use

Russian Nuclear Doctrine

One potential Russian use of NSNW might not come as a series of nuclear strikes on Kyiv, but rather a scenario in which a single NSNW is employed in a nonconventional manner, thus complicating how the United States should respond. Based on

23. Jack S. Levy, "Prospect Theory, Rational Choice, and International Relations," *International Studies Quarterly* 41, no. 1 (1997), <http://www.jstor.org/>.

24. Emily Sylak-Glassman, Sharon R. Williams, and Nayanee Gupta, "Appendix C.: Technology Forecasting Tools, Techniques, and Aids," *Current and Potential Use of Technology Forecasting Tools in the Federal Government* (Alexandria, VA: Institute for Defense Analyses, 2016), Appendix C-1, <http://www.jstor.org/>.

25. William A. Boettcher III, "The Prospects for Prospect Theory: An Empirical Evaluation of International Relations Applications of Framing and Loss Aversion," *Political Psychology* 25, no. 3 (2004): 333, <http://www.jstor.org/>.

Russian doctrine, general triggers for nuclear use could include strikes on critical Russian targets, significant losses across forces in theater, or the inability to defend against an imminent invasion.²⁶

In the case of the Ukraine conflict, the typical explanation for Russia choosing to employ NSNW would be the doctrinal conditions of major losses: to stop Ukrainian forces from inflicting a crushing battlefield defeat.²⁷ Yet relying on Russian doctrine to assess the likelihood of NSNW use is problematic, in part because published doctrine that has over time shown a decreasing threshold for use “could have been a part of Russian messaging to Western counterparts.”²⁸ Assessments such as significant losses or critical Russian targets are qualitative in their nature.²⁹ If Russian nuclear doctrine cannot necessarily be predictive of real-world behavior, implicit signals and incentives to Russia from America and its Allies provide more useful insights.

Messaging, Explicit and Implicit

In a constructivist view, states define their identities in socially constructed relationships with other states.³⁰ According to this view, Russia relies on other states, most notably the United States, to help define itself. The terms by which the United States uses to define Russia—specifically perceiving Russia as a threat and treating it accordingly—will affect Russia’s view of itself and by implication its possible desire to employ nuclear weapons.

In Russia’s ongoing process of self-identification, American and Western messaging leading up to, and during Russia’s war in Ukraine about the consequences for nuclear use has been a complicating factor. These messages have been decidedly mixed, with inconsistent remarks emerging between the United States and some NATO Allies.³¹ At the same time, American officials have consistently warned that if Putin loses the war, his reign is at risk.³² Central Intelligence Agency Director William Burns has noted that Putin himself believes he “cannot afford to lose” the war.³³

26. Michael Kofman, Anya Fink, and Jeffrey Edmonds, *Russian Strategy for Escalation Management: Evolution of Key Concepts* (Arlington, VA: Center for Naval Analysis, April 2020), 51, <https://www.cna.org/>.

27. See Sidharth Kaushal and Sam Cranny-Evans, “Russia’s Nonstrategic Nuclear Weapons and Its Views of Limited Nuclear War,” Royal United Services Institute (RUSI) (website), June 21, 2022, <https://rusi.org/>.

28. Kofman, Fink, and Edmonds, *Russian Strategy*, 44.

29. Kofman, Fink, and Edmonds, 45, 51.

30. Alexander Wendt, “Anarchy is What States Make of It: The Social Construction of Power Politics,” *International Organization* 46, no. 2 (1992), <https://www.jstor.org/>; and Ted Hopf, “The Promise of Constructivism in International Relations Theory,” *International Security* 23, no. 1 (1998), <https://www.jstor.org/>.

31. Elisa Vincent, “Macron Comment Raises Doubts on French Position in Case of Russian Nuclear Strike in Ukraine,” *Le Monde*, October 15, 2022, <https://www.lemonde.fr/>; and Gesine Weber, “How to Save French Credibility from Macron,” *War on the Rocks*, May 16, 2023, <https://warontherocks.com/>.

32. Office of the Director of National Intelligence (ODNI), *Annual Threat Assessment of the U.S. Intelligence Community* (Washington, DC: ODNI, February 6, 2023), <https://www.armed-services.senate.gov/>.

33. Edward Luce and William Burns, “Transcript: Vladimir Putin ‘Doesn’t Believe He Can Afford to Lose’ — William Burns, CIA Director,” *Financial Times*, May 8, 2022, <https://www.ft.com/>.

Furthermore, sanctions against Russia and battlefield losses that have dealt significant blows to its military have also eroded Russia's status as a great-power state. This material fact has resulted in an implicit message that Russia has lost its prestige and capability to defend itself in the future. The combination of mixed messaging, the risk to state leadership, and Russia's sapped capabilities has backed Putin in a dangerous corner, where he may be compelled to resort to nuclear weapon use to shore up his country's receding reputation in the world.

Messages: How Russia Should Think of Itself

Message I: Threats . . . and Off-Script Comments

Direct communications by US officials to Russia have been consistent about the serious consequences should Russia employ nuclear weapons in Ukraine, but indirect messages have been mixed, indicating some dissension within NATO itself. In both private and public messaging, National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan has warned of "catastrophic consequences" to Russia.³⁴ In the fall of 2022, the *Washington Post* published a report that stressed the volume and level of private messaging by President Joseph Biden's administration.³⁵ Other than Biden, those who have warned about the gravity and possible consequences of nuclear use include Burns and Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff General Mark Milley.³⁶

To some extent, it seems that Russia has responded to the messaging. Even after Russia withdrew from New START, NATO has kept some communication channels open with Moscow.³⁷ Although the US-Russian "deconfliction" hotline—a communication line established by the nations' militaries to prevent miscalculation and possible escalation during the conflict—has been used only once since the invasion of Ukraine, Russia has still received direct and indirect messages from the United States, in both media comments and private messages from officials.³⁸

34. Edward Helmore, "Jake Sullivan: US Will Act 'Decisively' If Russia Uses Nuclear Weapons in Ukraine," *Guardian*, September 25, 2022, <https://www.theguardian.com/>; and Vivian Salama and Michael R. Gordon, "Senior White House Official Involved in Undisclosed Talks with Top Putin Aides," *Wall Street Journal*, November 7, 2022, <https://www.wsj.com/>.

35. Paul Sonne and John Hudson, "U.S. Has Sent Private Warnings to Russia against Using a Nuclear Weapon," *Washington Post*, September 22, 2022, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/>.

36. Jordan Fabian, "CIA Chief Warns Russian Counterpart against Using Nuclear Weapons in Ukraine," *Bloomberg*, November 14, 2022, <https://www.bloomberg.com/>; Kevin Liptak, "Biden Warns Russia Not to Use a Tactical Nuclear Weapon," *CNN Politics*, October 25, 2022, <https://edition.cnn.com/>; and Bevan Hurley, "Top US General Says Russia Is 'Irresponsible' for 'Rattling Nuclear Sabre,'" *Independent*, April 26, 2022, <https://www.independent.co.uk/>.

37. North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), "NATO-Russia Relations: The Facts," NATO (web-site), April 20, 2023, <https://www.nato.int/>.

38. Phil Stewart and Idrees Ali, "Exclusive: U.S., Russia Have Used Their Military Hotline Once So Far during Ukraine War," *Reuters*, November 29, 2022, <https://www.reuters.com/>.

Despite US efforts to convey the gravity of the situation, NATO Allies have not always sent the same message, at times presenting Russia with a nonunified front on the part of the Alliance. NATO infighting, ranging from Germany hesitating to donate its Leopard tanks to the war effort to Turkey and Hungary blocking Finland's and Sweden's admittance to NATO, show an Alliance that is not speaking with a unified voice and implicitly suggest that NATO might not be able to agree on how to respond to serious Russian provocations.³⁹ France's President Emmanuel Macron in particular has provided a number of remarks that have suggested NATO may or may not respond to Russian NSNW use.⁴⁰

In an early October 2022 interview, Macron mentioned France would not consider nuclear retaliation against Russia should it choose to attack Ukraine with nuclear weapons because vital national interests "would not be at stake if there was a nuclear ballistic attack in Ukraine or in the region."⁴¹ Macron's subsequent criticism of remarks made by Biden in early October warning of a potential nuclear disaster has likely suggested to Russia that NATO may not follow the United States in retaliating against a Russian nuclear attack, whether with nuclear weapons from the United States, the United Kingdom, and France, or from various NATO conventional forces.⁴² If NATO does retaliate against Russian NSNW use in Ukraine, Macron's statements indicate it will only do so after contentious discussions.⁴³

This mixed message impacts the probability factor in Russia's decision-making. The United States has communicated publicly and privately that NSNW use will lead to grave consequences, but with Allies that might not be on board, Putin could conclude that America is bluffing about such consequences.

Message II: Putin Cannot Afford to Lose

Besides the confusing messages about how seriously the United States and its Allies would take Russian nuclear use in Ukraine, Putin has received Western messages about his own dire fate if he loses the war. Off-ramps are hard to envision for Putin—

39. Hans Von Der Burchard and Cory Bennett, "Germany Snubs Ukraine's Tank Request," *Politico EU*, January 20, 2023, <https://www.politico.eu/>; and Patrick Wintour, "Turkish President Lifts Veto on Finland's Nato Application," *Guardian*, March 7, 2023, <https://www.theguardian.com/>.

40. Patrick Wintour, "Emmanuel Macron's Remarks on Russia Set Alarm Bells Ringing," *Guardian*, February 8, 2022, <https://www.theguardian.com/>; Clea Caulcutt, "What the Hell Does Emmanuel Macron Think He's Playing at with Vladimir Putin?," *Politico EU*, March 13, 2022, <https://www.politico.eu/>; and "Russia Must Not Be Humiliated Despite Putin's 'Historic' Mistake, Macron Says," Reuters, June 4, 2022, <https://www.reuters.com/>.

41. Clea Caulcutt, "Macron under Fire for Saying France Wouldn't Respond in Kind If Russia Launched Nuclear Attack on Ukraine," *Politico EU*, October 13, 2022, <https://www.politico.eu/>.

42. Haisten Willis, "'Political Fiction': Macron Takes Aim at Biden's Nuclear Armageddon Remarks," *Washington Examiner*, October 8, 2022, <https://www.washingtonexaminer.com/>.

43. Willis.

views range from Macron's "we must not humiliate Russia" to former UK Prime Minister Boris Johnson's statement that finding de-escalation is Putin's own responsibility.⁴⁴

The primary assumption is that "Putin cannot afford to lose."⁴⁵ As the 2023 *Annual Threat Assessment of the U.S. Intelligence Community* states, "there is real potential for Russia's military failures in the war to hurt Russian President Vladimir Putin's domestic standing."⁴⁶ Implicitly, if Putin cannot afford to lose, an off-ramp to the conflict is understood to be an outcome that must be less than a defeat for Russia. This rules out scenarios such as a stalemate leading to exhaustion for both sides, but also a scenario in which Putin's off-ramp comes from defeat.⁴⁷

The presupposition from US and Western officials is that Russia must be treated as exceptional, as if Russia and Putin somehow "cannot" lose this war. States lose wars on a routine basis, without necessarily seeing a subsequent regime change. If a war is lost, the stakes may be higher for autocrats than democratically elected leaders, since defeat in war can diminish a leader's grip on power and galvanize the opposition.⁴⁸ Putin has staked his reputation on being a tough leader who has rebuilt Russia and restored its position, which is why the humiliation of a Russian loss could threaten his position.

Yet even with a Russian defeat, a Kremlin coup is far from certain. Putin's years of coup-proofing, including instilling a culture of mistrust among the agencies that could in theory have the power to force political change, mean that a change from within the system is unlikely.⁴⁹ The lack of a clear potential challenger to Putin comes from the way in which power is shared in complex circles of Russian business and military elites. Putin is not simply the leader but also the embodiment of a complex system of governance that may well outlast him.⁵⁰

Recent research finds leaders that launch wars can be differentiated by their culpability and vulnerability, and that these factors affect the leaders' vulnerability to replacement post war. "Nonvulnerable" leaders of authoritarian regimes have tenures that are mostly unaffected by war outcomes.⁵¹ If correct, even a clear defeat in Ukraine

44. "Boris Johnson: Putin's 'Only Instinct' Is to 'Double Down and Grozny-fy Kyiv,'" ITV News, March 1, 2022, YouTube video, 6:01, <https://youtu.be/>.

45. Agence France Presse (AFP), "Putin 'Doesn't Believe He Can Afford to Lose' in Ukraine: CIA Chief," France24, May 7, 2022, <https://www.france24.com/>.

46. ODNI, *Annual Threat Assessment*, 12.

47. Shashank Joshi, "Three Scenarios for How the War in Ukraine Could Play Out," *Economist*, November 14, 2022, <https://www.economist.com/>; and "The Ukraine Scenarios," *Foreign Affairs*, April 20, 2022, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/>.

48. Alexandre Debs and H. E. Goemans, "Regime Type, the Fate of Leaders, and War," *American Political Science Review* 104, no. 3 (2010): 432, 435, <https://www.jstor.org/>.

49. Daniel Treisman, "What Could Bring Putin Down? Regime Collapse Is More Likely Than a Coup," *Foreign Affairs*, November 2, 2022, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/>.

50. Bruce Bueno de Mesquita et al., *The Logic of Political Survival* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2005); and Gleb Pavlovsky, "Russian Politics under Putin: The System Will Outlast the Master," *Foreign Affairs* 95, no. 3 (May/June 2016), <http://www.jstor.org/>.

51. Sarah E. Croco and Jessica L. P. Weeks, "War Outcomes and Leader Tenure," *World Politics* 68, no. 4 (2016), <https://www.jstor.org/>.

might not lead to a putsch in Moscow.⁵² It is too early to tell whether Wagner Group leader Yevgeny Prigozhin's brief march to Moscow in June 2023 will prove to weaken Putin's power or help him by identifying a threat to target and neutralize. Regardless of the long-term implications, in the current environment such an event will surely make Putin feel more threatened, something US officials tacitly recognized in their decision not to tip him off to Prigozhin's plans and risk being accused of sponsoring such actions.⁵³

Since Putin's overthrow, even in the event of a loss in Ukraine, is not a foregone conclusion, Western suggestions to the contrary are not only empirically suspect but also likely to raise his own threat perception in dangerous ways, including the possibility of justifying NSNW use as a last gamble that might overturn the chessboard and allow some sort of victory in Ukraine. As mentioned previously, prospect theory argues that leaders will take greater risks to avoid loss.⁵⁴ Public messaging to Putin that if he loses this war, he will lose his position, could make employing NSNW worth the risk and a more rational choice.

Message III: Great Power No More

Messaging to Russia has been inconsistent about the possible consequences for NSNW use but consistent about the consequences for Putin if he should lose the war. Unfortunately, another consistent message that has been sent to Russia is that its war in Ukraine has shown Russia is no longer a great power. A state's ability to issue threats to its adversaries derives from four characteristics: aggregate power, geographic proximity, offensive capability, and offensive intentions.⁵⁵

At the same time, a state's own identity is not formed in isolation, but as part of a complex network of connections with other states: in other words, a state perceiving that the international system is hostile will act accordingly, shaping its own identity in opposition to other threatening states.⁵⁶ These characteristics of threat, blended with the way in which states form their own identity, show the difficulty of Russia's current position. If Russia loses its ability to threaten, it could lose its ability to deter—not necessarily its ability to deter a US nuclear strike on Moscow, but its ability to deter, for instance, new weapons systems and munitions being provided to Ukraine, or to deter Ukrainian forces from retaking Crimea.

52. Adam E. Casey, "Putin Has Coup-Proofed His Regime," *Foreign Policy*, March 23, 2022, <https://foreignpolicy.com/>; and see also "A Beginner's Guide to Russia's Fragmented Opposition," *Moscow Times*, March 6, 2023, <https://www.themoscowtimes.com/>.

53. David E. Sanger and Julian E. Barnes, "U.S. Knew Prigozhin Was Preparing to Take Military Action against Russia," *New York Times*, June 23, 2023, <https://www.nytimes.com/>.

54. Robert Jervis, "Political Implications of Loss Aversion," *Political Psychology* 13, no. 2 (1992), <https://doi.org/>.

55. Stephen M. Walt, "Alliance Formation and the Balance of World Power," *International Security* 9, no. 4 (Spring 1985), <https://doi.org/>.

56. Wendt, "Anarchy."

Since February 2022, Russia has seen a steady loss of some elements of national power. Its aggregate power has decreased, with its battered economy, unprecedented military casualties, and major losses of military equipment.⁵⁷ In terms of Russia's proximate power—its ability to threaten states that are geographically nearby—it is arguably in a worse position now than before. Russia's proximity to states through NATO expansion to Finland or other alliances and security guarantees, such as the British guarantee to defend Sweden, now threaten it more than before the war began.⁵⁸

Russia's disastrous military performance indicates a clear loss of offensive capability.⁵⁹ This is in stark contrast with the steady increase in the size of NATO forces along its borders and the 2023 claims by Biden that "NATO is stronger than it's ever been."⁶⁰ Russia has displayed its offensive intentions, but a case could be made that NATO has as well—after all, in April 2022, US Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin stated that the United States and its Allies wanted to see Russia "weakened to the degree that it can't do the kinds of things that it has done in invading Ukraine." Even though these comments were reportedly walked back, it seems likely that Russia will still believe this is NATO's stance.⁶¹ Statements such as those of NATO Secretary General Jan Stoltenberg, who has committed NATO to stand with Ukraine "as long as it takes," are also likely to increase Russia's threat perceptions.⁶²

Considering Russia's loss of capability to threaten, if the odds of military success continue to decrease, Russia's use of NSNWs becomes more plausible. Regardless of the US response, NSNW employment would secure the reputation of Russia as an unpredictable and dangerous actor: a foe that commands respect on the world stage, even if it loses on the battlefield. This need to command respect comes in part from how Russian identity has become defined partly by the threat from NATO, the West, and above all, the United States.

As noted constructivist Alexander Wendt observed in the early 1990s, state identity formation is concerned with security—but security is understood in different ways at

57. UK Foreign Commonwealth and Development Office and Ian Stubbs, "Russia's Military and Its Defence Industry Are Failing in Ukraine: UK Statement to the OSCE," GOV.UK, March 15, 2023, <https://www.gov.uk/>; Jack Watling and Nick Reynolds, *Meatgrinder: Russian Tactics in the Second Year of Its Invasion of Ukraine* (London: RUSI, May 19, 2023), <https://static.rusi.org/>; and Georgi Kantchev and Evan Greshkovich, "Russia's Economy Is Starting to Come Undone," *Wall Street Journal*, March 28, 2023, <https://www.wsj.com/>.

58. Prime Minister's Office, and Rt Hon Boris Johnson, MP, "News Story: Prime Minister Signs New Assurances to Bolster European Security: 11 May 2022," GOV.UK, May 11, 2022, <https://www.gov.uk/>.

59. leedrake5, "Russia-Ukraine War: Equipment Loss Tracking," GitHub repository, <https://github.com/>; and Alexander Smith, "The 'Stunning' Scale of Russian Deaths in Ukraine Signals Trouble Ahead for Putin," NBC News, May 2, 2023, <https://www.nbcnews.com/>.

60. Kelly Hooper, "In Poland, Biden Says 'NATO is Stronger Than It's Ever Been,'" *Politico*, February 21, 2023, <https://www.politico.com/>.

61. Ellen Mitchell, "Biden Told Austin, Blinken to Tone Down Remarks Supporting Ukraine: Report," *The Hill*, June 16, 2022, <https://thehill.com/>.

62. Natasha Bertrand et al., "Austin's Assertion That US Wants to 'Weaken' Russia Underlines Biden Strategy Shift," CNN Politics, April 26, 2022, <https://edition.cnn.com/>; and "Secretary General in Kyiv: NATO Stands with Ukraine," NATO (website), April 20, 2023, <https://www.nato.int/>.

different times and is shaped in part by other states, and by the distribution of power in the international system.⁶³ The war in Ukraine has changed Russian conceptions of its security. Its military has proved to be ineffective and its adversaries resolute.⁶⁴ In fact, its adversaries are not only resolute, but they are also willing to fight a proxy war in or through Ukraine and willing to expand the geographic reach of their threat and the proximate military power on Russia's borders.⁶⁵

The long-term devastation that sanctions will have on Russia's economy, despite the economy doing better than conventional wisdom expected, must also be considered.⁶⁶ As a result, Russia may see itself in a position with little leverage left—as discussed above, a problematic position for Putin that could lead to a rational decision to use NSNW. Although Russia has not lost its ability to hurt, still has room to escalate, and still is trying to wear down Ukrainian will, a path to Putin's maximalist aims at the beginning of the war has vanished—if it ever existed. But a loss of the war, or even a pyrrhic victory, however celebrated by Kremlin propagandists, will come with the baggage of a Russian state with heightened threat perceptions and virtually no conventional means to threaten.

Conclusion

Russia's primary deterrent, a powerful conventional military, has failed. The use of nonstrategic nuclear weapons will not change this fact. But NSNW use—a massive gamble—could, in Putin's view, reshape the world's view of Russia, shatter assumptions about the international order, and above all, force the world to take him seriously. The use of Russian NSNW, even only one, would signal to America that despite its defeat in Ukraine, Russia is still a great power. If it is willing to break the nuclear taboo, what might it do next?

The conflict in Ukraine has taken place on the world stage, with all of Russia's forces involved. Russia's status in the international system and future security considerations are at stake in part because of the signals that the United States and some Western states have sent to Russia. These explicit messages convey (1) strategic ambiguity about a US or Western response to the Russian use of NSNW, (2) Russia's loss in the war will mean the end of Putin's regime, and (3) Russia's status as a great power will be eliminated. For Russia, the combination of these messages suggests that NSNW use now is

63. Wendt, "Anarchy."

64. Kateryna Stepanenko et al., "Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, November 1," Institute for the Study of War, November 1, 2022, <https://understandingwar.org/>; and Pjotr Sauer, "'We Have Already Lost': Far-Right Russian Bloggers Slam Military Failures," *Guardian*, September 8, 2022, <https://www.theguardian.com/>.

65. Ted Galen Carpenter, "The NATO vs. Russia Proxy War in Ukraine Could Become a Real War," Cato Institute (website), October 12, 2022, <https://www.cato.org/>; and Hal Brands, "Russia Is Right: The U.S. Is Waging a Proxy War in Ukraine," Bloomberg, May 10, 2022, <https://www.bloomberg.com/>.

66. "As Europe Falls into Recession, Russia Climbs Out," *Economist*, October 13, 2022, <https://www.economist.com/>; and "Why the Russian Economy Keeps Beating Expectations," *Economist*, August 23, 2022, <https://www.economist.com/>.

more rational than ever before. It might or might not lead to military victory, but it could ensure Russian security after the war.

American deterrence has been undermined by the three messages that the United States and other Western states have communicated to Russia since the beginning of the conflict. The implicit messages behind these explicit messages include (1) a potentially lower risk than in the past for Russia if they employ NSNW, (2) using NSNW might be worth the gamble for Putin if he wishes to remain in power, and (3) NSNW use could change a narrative of loss of great-power status. These messages collectively are dangerous because they may lower Russia's threshold for nuclear use.

The interplay of these three messages with changing battlefield conditions means that each day risks Russia deciding to employ nuclear weapons. Perhaps, as some suggest, the nuclear taboo has become a self-sustaining tradition; moral and humanitarian concerns and the weight of decades of nonuse have led to a universal conclusion that nuclear weapons employment really has become unthinkable.⁶⁷ On the other hand, the longer that circumstances that could foster nuclear use last—such as the current situation in Ukraine—the greater the risk of its occurrence.

Although democracies struggle to be consistent in strategic messaging, and Russia will interpret any American action in the worst possible light, this does not mean that American signaling cannot become more cautious, deliberate, and intentional. The United States should be more cognizant of how Russia will interpret formal and informal signals from the international community to better anticipate Russia's potential employment of nonstrategic nuclear weapons. **Æ**

67. Thomas Schelling, *Arms and Influence* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2008), 301.

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