

Russia's Concept of Escalation Management

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The Russian Federation's concept of escalation management during the current security situation in Ukraine can be roughly divided into periods of demonstration, adequate damage infliction, and retaliation.¹ In November 2021, satellite imagery showcased Moscow's demonstration in mobilizing 100,000+ soldiers along with tanks and other military hardware during its massive military build-up beside the Ukraine border. In late February 2022, Russian forces invaded Ukraine and commenced major bombing campaigns, inflicting significant damage throughout the country. By mid-March 2022, Russian forces increased their bombing campaigns in retaliation for Ukraine's unwillingness to capitulate to Russian demands and for making Russia look ineffective and unskilled on the international stage. Russia continues to display its escalation management techniques and may shock the world by using nuclear weapons if embarrassment continues at the hands of the weaker Ukrainian Army.

Russian President, Vladimir Putin, disguised his true intentions to invade Ukraine as long as possible while displaying Russia's first concept of escalation management, demonstration, via the façade of military exercises with Belarus along their Ukrainian borders. While other countries cried foul and warned Russia not to attack Ukraine, Russian and Belarussian leaders insisted their forces were present along Ukraine's borders only to continue military exercises. In December 2021, US President Joe Biden warned Putin of sweeping economic sanctions if Russia invaded Ukraine. Russia responded with detailed security demands to the West, including that NATO ceases all military activity in eastern Europe and Ukraine and that the alliance never accept Ukraine or other former Soviet nations as members. By early February 2022, Russia had enough forces to commence an invasion, which was forewarned by American and European leaders. Putin appeared to set the stage for the period of damage infliction by claiming Russia's security demands about NATO expansion continued to go unheeded.²

Russia finally pivoted on 25 February 2022 and commenced its second phase of escalation management by invading Ukraine on multiple fronts to the north, east, and south. Putin's forces and tanks rolled into Ukrainian areas of strategic importance and commenced shelling and killing Ukrainians. Within hours, Ukrainian leaders were in hiding from Russian forces specifically seeking to kill them and install a new, pro-Russian government. For weeks, Russian forces inflicted significant destruction, killing innocent people every day, destroying infrastructure throughout the country, and forcing millions of refugees into European countries.³ However, Ukrainian forces also inflicted significant damage against their Russian counterparts.

The Ukrainian Army's perseverance and resolve to not give up their country without a lasting fight, propelled the third phase of Russian escalation management, retaliation. This phase was heavily promoted in week five of the conflict when Russian forces amplified their shelling of Ukrainian homes, hospitals, and other non-military infrastructures. Likely secondary reasons for this increased effort were to force Ukrainian leadership into cease-fire negotiations to ease the burden on its citizens. Russian losses of senior officers, soldiers, aircraft, and tanks continue to provide humiliation regarding Russian training, tactics, and procedures, while confirming that Russia's rejuvenated military still requires much attention. Russian leaders continue to hint at the possibility that Russia could utilize its nuclear arsenal; however, Putin may realize that initiating nuclear weapons also potentially initiates an unwanted NATO neighborhood response.⁴

Although only six-weeks into the Russia-Ukraine 2022 conflict, Russia has already revealed all three of its escalation management phases. When the substantial military build-up and demonstration along the border failed to intimidate Ukraine (and the West), Russia invaded and initiated its damage campaign. The retaliation campaign quickly followed due to Ukrainian forces' unwavering grit. What remains to be seen is whether Russia will favor its nuclear option.

Notes

¹ Michael Kofman, Anya Fink, and Jeffrey Edmonds. "Russian Strategy for Escalation Management: Evolution of Key Concepts," CNA, 13 April 2020, https://www.cna.org/CNA_files/PDF/DRM-2019-U-022455-1Rev.pdf.

² Name withheld per ACSC policy, "Current Info Update: Russia-Ukraine Situation Update" (briefing, Air Command and Staff College, Maxwell AFB, AL, 14 March 2022).

³ Robert E. Litan, "Russia Can be Made to Pay for Ukraine Damage Now," Brookings Institute, 17 March 2022, <https://www.brookings.edu/opinions/russia-can-be-made-to-pay-for-ukraine-damage-now/>.

⁴ Gordon Corera, "Ukraine war: Could Russia Use Tactical Nuclear Weapons?," *BBC News*, 16 March 2022, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-60664169>.