

Russia RTF Short Paper # 4

Russian Escalation Management in Ukraine Crisis, 2022

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Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February of 2022 provided a significant data point regarding Russian forces' readiness, tactics, techniques and procedures, and escalation management. What was once conceptual and only captured in Russian doctrine has now seen "first contact," and now the West can absorb new insights. While much remains to play out in this conflict, the transition from Phase I to Phase II by the Russian military display a rethinking of escalation management, particularly the potential abandonment of "escalate to deescalate" or "sufficient damage" doctrine.

The events leading up to the initial invasion in 2022 had all the hallmarks of a textbook Russian doctrinal land-grab in Ukraine. Before 24 February, more than 100,000 Russian troops built up around the Ukrainian border from the North, South, and Eastern directions. Russia focused limited cyber-attacks on the Ukrainian government resources, and separatist forces began to escalate tension and conflict in the Eastern Donbass region. Simultaneously, an internal narrative began to revolve around the mistreatment of Russian speaking Ukrainians, with a muted acknowledgement of "Nazis" in the Ukrainian government.¹ To those paying attention, these actions were clearly an escalatory pretense to the invasion of the Donbass region, as seen previously in Crimea.

The intense resistance of the Ukrainian forces and populous as well as considerable support from Western allies created a divergence from the results of the 2014 Crimean invasion. What Russia had clearly thought would be a short-lived occupation followed by regime change turned into a comedy of military errors including the loss and abandonment of significant Russian forces, and the resulting "meme-war" which painted Russia as inept occupiers. Were it not for the significant anti-tank/personnel weapons combined with an information campaign providing real-time data to the world, Mr. Putin's *fait accompli* may have been completed.

Instead, where Russian doctrine calls for escalation significant enough to deter the West from further action (up to and including the use of non-strategic nuclear weapons), Russia was forced to accept the circumstances and continue to fight.² In fact, Russian forces are designed for short-lived, dramatic escalation, not attrition warfare as it is now forced to conduct.³ The fact remains, Russia has the firepower and resources (for now) to conduct a catastrophic invasion, including the elimination of Ukrainian defense forces and government officials. They are aware, however, the world would quickly condemn such actions and even more severe consequences could be perpetrated from the West. Instead, they continue to advance the “denazification” narrative internally, and to slowly escalate the Ukrainian conflict, with the most recent open-source intelligence reflecting the potential use of chemical weapons.

As this conflict continues to progress, facts thus far point toward further escalation swiftly (or preemptively) condemned by the West. As we observe Russian escalatory practices, there are benchmarks to mark the transition from what is now “local war” to what they consider “regional war.” Russian “regional war” is most notably indicated by the demonstrative use of strategic or non-strategic nuclear weapons. Such a detonation would be representative of a return to their own “escalatory ladder,” and a harbinger of larger operations beyond the borders of Ukraine.⁴

The recent conflict clearly represents either a much slower escalation than anticipated, or the abandonment of the “escalate to deescalate” doctrine. Until this is clear, it is imperative that the West continue to offer Mr. Putin off ramps in which the case save face. A regime change that Mr. Putin perceives to be initiated by the West could be catastrophic for the free world, as Russia holds more nuclear weapons than any country in the world. It would be best, in the author’s

opinion, to allow for Russian self-removal from Ukraine, and an international call for fair elections in the country, assuming such a course still exists.

¹ “Timeline of the Russian Invasion of Ukraine,” *Wikipedia*, accessed 28 March 2022. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Timeline_of_the_2022_Russian_invasion_of_Ukraine

² Michael Koffman and Anya Fink, “Escalation Management and Nuclear Employment in Russian Military Strategy.” *War on the Rocks*. (23 June 2020) <https://warontherocks.com/2020/06/escalation-management-and-nuclear-employment-in-russian-military-strategy/>.

³ James Ragland and Adam Lowther. “America Isn’t Ready for Russia’s Battlefield Nuclear Weapons.” Accessed 5 February 2022. <https://www.19fortyfive.com/2022/02/america-isnt-ready-for-russias-battlefield-nuclear-weapons/>.

⁴ Michael Koffman and Anya Fink, “Escalation Management and Nuclear Employment in Russian Military Strategy.” *War on the Rocks*. (23 June 2020) <https://warontherocks.com/2020/06/escalation-management-and-nuclear-employment-in-russian-military-strategy/>.