

RUSSIAN ESCALATION MANAGEMENT IN UKRAINE

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Given the current security situation in Ukraine, the Kremlin's concept of escalation management is focused on minimizing both vertical and horizontal escalation abroad in order to achieve its strategic goals. The Kremlin's implementation of escalation management is effective due to its large nuclear arsenal, Vladimir Putin's demonstrated resolve not to cede to NATO demands, and his iron grasp on domestic activities in Russia. Russia will conduct horizontal escalation management abroad by containing its use of conventional military forces to Ukraine or other non-NATO states. It will conduct vertical escalation management by creating opportunities for strategic off-ramps if Ukraine or its allies or partners threaten to execute Russian regime change or threaten removal of Russian forces from Ukraine.

The Kremlin's concept of escalation management is effective due to its large nuclear arsenal and the cognitively entrenched "theory of defeat" among its people.¹ The legitimacy of Vladimir Putin's regime rests on Russia's ability to reassert itself as a great power. The desire for the return to great power status is fueled by strong resentment against the West within the political elite, as well as among average Russian citizens.² A history of perceived persecution among Russians lends credibility to Russia's current actions in Ukraine, and it is unlikely the Kremlin will accept total defeat in the current conflict.³ The Kremlin will, however, attempt to manage horizontal and vertical escalation to successfully manage the conflict in its favor.

Russia will implement horizontal escalation management primarily by limiting its conventional military actions to Ukraine or other non-NATO members. Ukraine is not currently a member of NATO, and therefore it does not warrant the protections afforded by the North Atlantic Treaty. NATO members are disincentivized to respond to Russia's actions in Ukraine with military force due to the potential for vertical escalation of force by Russia in response. Russia will also seek to implement horizontal escalation management by creating distractions for

NATO members in order to divert attention away from Russian actions in Ukraine. Russia will accomplish this by employing asymmetric capabilities—such as disinformation dissemination techniques—to incite domestic dissent and magnify existing domestic political tensions within NATO member states.

Russia will implement vertical escalation management by creating opportunities for strategic off-ramps if Ukraine or its allies or partners threaten regime change or total removal of Russian forces from Ukraine. Russia will use cyberattacks, destructive counter-space capabilities, or battlefield nuclear weapons if Ukraine, NATO members, or other Western nations opposed to Russian strategic goals attempt to cross Russian “red lines.” Although the Kremlin will present off-ramps for escalation, a very real danger exists in that Vladimir Putin and his close circle seek to reestablish the respect for Russia once afforded prior to the collapse of the Soviet Union.⁴

The Kremlin’s concept of escalation management in Ukraine hinges on successful horizontal and vertical escalation management. Putin’s regime seeks to accomplish its strategic goals in Ukraine, and not to widen its current security dilemma into larger military conflicts with the United States or NATO.

¹ Sergei Medvedev, *The Return of the Russian Leviathan* (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2020), 221.

² *Ibid.*, 222

³ Ibid., 221.

⁴ Ibid., 223.