


Russia's Failed Nuclear Coercion Against Ukraine

During the summer of 1945, Harry Truman intuitively came to believe in the effectiveness of nuclear coercion. The Soviet Union would have to cave in to US nuclear might, the President thought. Washington could organize Europe (and the world) as it saw fit against Moscow's wishes, and regional conventional superiority if necessary, given that nuclear mushroom clouds would soon reveal American destructive supremacy. He was flabbergasted a few months later, when the Soviets proved unimpressed by US nuclear allusions.¹ By the end of the decade, with Moscow's atomic arsenal barely nascent, the US government forfeited nuclear coercion and chose to invest massively in

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conventional rearmament to deter Soviet expansionism. Is there anything that Truman learned about nuclear coercion that today's Russian leaders should have known?

Vladimir Putin also seems to have believed in nuclear coercion throughout 2022. From the beginning of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February of that year, Moscow used nuclear threats both to deter direct NATO military involvement and to limit Western aid to Ukraine as well as sanctions against Russia.² However, Kyiv itself was not the main target of Moscow's nuclear rhetoric—until September 2022.³ Only then did journalists, analysts and policymakers begin to assess that the Kremlin was employing nuclear threats in an attempt to strongarm the government in Kyiv into acquiescing to the illegal annexation of four Ukrainian provinces. And yet, a mere few weeks after escalating its nuclear rhetoric, Russia suddenly stepped it back. Did Moscow try to leverage its nuclear arsenal to coerce Ukraine in the first place? If it did, why have Russian attempts to strongarm Kyiv been unsuccessful?

For obvious reasons, we could not study records in Moscow to understand Russian decision-making first-hand. Instead, we offer both an empirical analysis of what transpired and theoretically grounded arguments about which factors *plausibly* mattered. In doing so, we provide one of the first scholarly analyses of why Russia attempted something that was probably doomed to fail from the very beginning.

In this paper, we offer three main arguments which could be helpful for a broader understanding of the Russian invasion of Ukraine and for the study of international security. First, we build on recent research to explain why nuclear coercion is both rare and rarely successful. In other words, we explain why Russian decisionmakers should have known better. Second, we outline how Russia attempted nuclear coercion against Ukraine and how it abandoned its attempts. And third, we argue that Russia's nuclear coercion attempts against Ukraine failed because of Moscow's decision-making pathologies, which led to three errors: an overestimation of the utility of nuclear weapons; a fundamental misunderstanding of the West's stakes; and an underestimation of the Global South's reaction. Therefore, this episode teaches policymakers that deterrence is much harder to achieve when adversaries misjudge capabilities and resolve.

What Do We Know About Nuclear Coercion?

Coercion is successful when its target is forced to do something it does not want to do.⁴ Such strong-arming has two main variants: compellence seeks to alter an actor's behavior, while deterrence aims to prevent the addressee from changing conduct. In the case at hand, as often in wartime, the theoretical distinction is blurred: did Moscow employ nuclear rhetoric to compel Kyiv to formally

consent to its annexation of four Ukrainian provinces, or to deter it from taking military action in response? A bit of both, as we show in the second section of this paper. Both deterrence and compellence in practice, however, involve threats and/or actions to create costs for the target. If rhetorical threats prove insufficient, the coercer can try to employ demonstrative, limited or forceful military action. Russia did not leverage its nuclear arsenal for the latter three purposes, but are there good arguments that could have convinced Moscow that threats alone could have succeeded?

There are very few such arguments, scholars of coercion argue. For three main reasons, all overt coercion—nuclear or not—faces an uphill battle.⁵ First, and most fundamentally, if the target does not preemptively accommodate an (outwardly) powerful and (ostensibly) committed adversary, it is very difficult for the coercer to render credible public threats to impose sufficient costs for the target to then acquiesce. Second, and relatedly, publicly giving in to the coercer's demands often involves domestic political costs and international reputation damage—in a world of repeated interactions, both significantly increase the stakes for the target. Last but not least, it is difficult for the coercer to credibly commit to refraining from demanding further concessions in the future. Thus, a target that already questions the coercer's capabilities or resolve has strong incentives to stand its ground in order to avoid weakening its future position. This being said, could *nuclear* coercion, particularly against non-nuclear states, be somewhat easier to accomplish?

Many scholars have thought so, just as Truman did.⁶ Their optimism was grounded in the notion that, when nuclear capabilities are one-sided, the coercer's ability to inflict pain is immense, while the target's response cannot but be comparatively modest. Targets, inherently uncertain about coercers' stakes, should do everything to avoid nuclear weapons being used against them, thus rendering nuclear coercive success likely, the argument went. This deduction seemed to be buttressed by quantitative findings from the past two decades suggesting that possessing nuclear weapons offered competitive advantages. Scholars found that states with nuclear weapons tended, in general, to prevail over their non-nuclear peers.⁷ Others concluded that atomic arms offered significant bargaining advantages.⁸ And still others argued that states with larger nuclear arsenals emerged largely victorious from crises with other nuclear states.⁹ Yet, even if nuclear weapons generally helped their possessors get their way, would abstainers always (or even frequently) cave in? What stakes were involved, and what victories were gained?

Even if nuclear-armed states generally seem to fare better, there are many examples of non-nuclear states

There are many examples of non-nuclear states standing up to nuclear-armed bullies

standing up to nuclear-armed bullies.¹⁰ Scholars have identified sixteen wars in which non-nuclear states fought against nuclear-armed adversaries, although nuclear coercion was not necessarily used explicitly. To illustrate, the Soviet Union challenged the United States over Berlin in 1948, only a few years after Washington had used nuclear weapons over Japan and more than a year before Moscow tested its first nuclear device. In Korea in the early 1950s, Chinese troops attacked US forces (China did not test a nuclear weapon until 1964). Iraq fought wars against the United States in 1991 and 2003. Mere US nuclear possession did not compel Yugoslavia to withdraw from Kosovo in 1999. Beyond challengers to the United States, Egypt and Syria, for two, mounted an offensive against nuclear-armed Israel in 1973. And Vietnam fought a war against China in 1979. But maybe specific nuclear coercive demands have fared better?

Cases of successful nuclear coercion are exceedingly rare. Many have argued that the US use of nuclear weapons against Hiroshima and Nagasaki in 1945 led to Japan's decision to surrender. Conversely, others point out that nuclear use was clearly not a sufficient condition, and even its necessity remains contested.¹¹ If scholars cannot agree that the *use* of nuclear weapons led to concessions, then the mere *threat* is all the less likely to succeed. A recent analysis concluded that, throughout the nuclear era, states armed with atomic weapons succeeded at nuclear coercion against non-nuclear adversaries anywhere between zero and five times—depending on how restrictively one assesses the available evidence.¹² But, if nuclear coercion does happen, however rarely, why are have-nots not frightened by their adversaries' atomic arms?

Nuclear coercion is exceedingly difficult for reasons similar to those that make coercion hard in general.¹³ Analyses of Russian strategic literature reveal that the limitations of nuclear coercion were well-known among Moscow's nuclear strategy experts in 2022.¹⁴ The main challenge is rendering nuclear threats credible within the current international order in which nuclear use would involve

both stark strategic and moral costs.¹⁵ Thus, the coercer has to persuade the addressee that the stakes at hand are higher than the cost associated with nuclear use; that lower-cost conventional means are unavailable; and that using (some) nuclear weapons would deliver the expected results. Aware of these

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constraints, a non-nuclear target is not a passive receiver of nuclear coercion. Rather, it will seek to actively identify the coercer's red lines, gambling that, as long as the interaction remains below a certain threshold, the cost of implementing the nuclear threat would outweigh the expected benefits for the coercer. How

should we expect coercers to try to credibly signal sufficient resolve to use nuclear weapons?

Potentially, bluster and brinkmanship could suggest either sufficiently high stakes or conceal an actual bluff.¹⁶ First, in terms of bluster, coercers could inflate their stakes, portraying themselves as backed against the wall, and utter precise (seemingly) proportionate threats. This could take the form of explicit public extortions tying one's political hands, or pledges to use limited nuclear destruction. Second, in terms of actions, coercers could move closer to the nuclear brink, making their coercive attempt more credible, but also accepting the risk of a possible accidental nuclear escalation. Engaging in nuclear alerts, deployments, and pre-delegations could fall into this second category. Nuclear tests, demonstrations, or costly attack preparations could follow. All of these steps are either costly or risky, or both—and Russia took almost none of them. But then again, why utter nuclear threats in the first place if you are unwilling to (at least partially) follow through?

Was 2022 A Case of Nuclear Coercion against Kyiv?

Most of Russia's nuclear rhetoric after February 2022 was directed at Western states. Conversely, its statements directed at Ukraine remained implicit and vague, thus falling short of nuclear coercion until fall 2022. Russian officials did claim that Kyiv had tried to obtain nuclear weapons, could engage in "chemical terrorism," or hosted a biological weapons program.¹⁷ These statements *could* be read as indirect nuclear threats given that Moscow's official doctrine allows for nuclear use in case of an attack with weapons of mass destruction.¹⁸ Yet, Moscow failed to demand a particular change in behavior from Ukraine, did not invoke or even obscurely refer to its own nuclear arsenal, and thus did not seem to go beyond a general attempt at what could bolster the credibility of subsequent nuclear threats.

Attempting Coercion Against Ukraine

In late September 2022, by contrast, Russia's rhetoric began to explicitly link the threat of nuclear weapons use to specific ongoing or planned Ukrainian actions in an apparent attempt to coerce Kyiv into adopting behavior in line with Russian goals. Coming against the backdrop of quick Ukrainian advances recapturing Russian-occupied territories,¹⁹ the wording and timing of these statements suggests that Moscow sought to compel Kyiv to halt its counteroffensive and further deter Ukrainian attempts to retake four territories in Eastern Ukraine in particular.

Moscow sought to compel Kyiv to halt its counteroffensive

Putin prepared the ground on September 16, suggesting that Russia's response to Ukrainian battlefield successes could become "more impactful" if the "situation" continued.²⁰ Despite the still implicit wording, Ukraine's allies interpreted Putin's statement as a nuclear coercion attempt. Notably, US President Biden immediately and publicly warned Russia of the "consequential" response to any nuclear escalation.²¹

With Kyiv continuing its counteroffensive, Moscow upped the ante. On September 19 and 20, Russian state media reported that the occupying authorities in the four partially occupied territories of Luhansk, Donetsk, Zaporizhzhia and Kherson would organize "referenda" to "join" Russia.²² Subsequently, several high-level statements argued that these regions could then be "defended" by Russia with nuclear weapons. Initially, Putin still made this point implicitly. In a televised speech on September 21, he first emphasized the need to protect the "territorial integrity of Russia and support the ... will of our compatriots to choose their future," referring to the partially occupied regions; and then separately stressed that Moscow would "make use of all weapon systems available" to "defend Russia" against any "threat to [its] territorial integrity."²³ His Deputy Security Council Chair Dmitry Medvedev made the threat explicit on the following day, explaining that "strategic nuclear weapons" could be used to defend "all of the joined territories."²⁴ A few days later, Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov left no doubt that Russia's nuclear doctrine, which allowed for the use of nuclear weapons in case of an "aggression" that threatened the "existence of the state," applied to all territories Moscow considered a part of Russia.²⁵

Kyiv and its Western allies publicly interpreted these statements as nuclear coercion. On September 21, Biden condemned Russia's "overt nuclear threats against Europe," while Ukrainian presidential adviser Mykhailo Podolyak acknowledged the Kremlin was "threatening" Ukrainians "with nuclear weapons."²⁶ US Secretary of State Antony Blinken explained that "Russia would not hesitate to use ... all weapons systems available ... in response to a threat to its territorial integrity," which was "all the more menacing given Russia's intention to annex large swaths of Ukraine."²⁷ A few days later, Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky himself added that the nuclear threat might be a "reality" and condemned Russia's "nuclear blackmail."²⁸ In late September, media reported that Western intelligence services were indeed so concerned that they had increased their efforts to detect any Russian nuclear posture changes.²⁹

Calling the Bluff

Curiously, however, as Russia formally annexed the Ukrainian regions on September 30, 2022—after so-called "referendums" had been held in the concerned territories from September 23 to 27—and even though Ukraine continued its

counteroffensive, Moscow took no further steps to demonstrate high stakes and render its threats more credible.³⁰ When formally announcing the annexation, Putin made a single nuclear reference describing the US nuclear bombings in World War II as a “precedent.” However, rather than directly threatening Ukraine, the passage condemned US counter-messaging on the costs of nuclear weapons use. Thus, Putin framed the US nuclear attacks on Japan as a precedent not for Russian behavior in Ukraine, but for US attempts to “intimidate” Russia.³¹ Indeed, by the end of the month, Moscow’s rhetoric shifted from coercive language addressing Kyiv to statements challenging the West’s counter-messaging more broadly. For example, Russian spokespeople questioned NATO states’ resolve to decisively respond to nuclear weapons use, claimed that the West had misread Russia’s statements, and emphasized that a nuclear war “should never be unleashed.”³²

This trend was not reversed even after Ukrainian forces recaptured Kherson, the capital of one of the annexed regions, in late October. Although Russian officials issued a series of warnings that Kyiv was planning to use a “dirty bomb” around the same time, which many Ukrainian and Western officials interpreted as an implicit nuclear threat, statements did not demand any particular Ukrainian behavior but rather remained vague, triggering speculation over what Russia might have sought to imply.³³ Finally, in late October, Moscow backpedaled at the highest level, with Putin denying that Russia had ever intended to use nuclear weapons against Ukraine.³⁴

Why Did Moscow Do It, Then Undo It?

In the absence of access to the policy memoranda, discussion protocols, and decision-making documents that could shed light on Russia’s planning of its nuclear coercion of Ukraine, we can only speculate which factors Moscow might have misjudged to go down a path that led nowhere. However, we posit that its flawed decision-making generated from three crucial errors in judgement.

That Russian decision-making was flawed is not a new insight. Journalistic accounts of the Kremlin’s invasion of Ukraine revealed that the planning of the war was done in a small circle composed of Putin and his closest advisors. Many high-level officials, including Foreign Minister Lavrov or Security Council Secretary Patrushev, were reportedly not consulted or involved.³⁵ These revelations suggest a structural propensity within Russia’s highest decision-making circles toward privileging trusted relationships, discounting expertise, overestimating Russia’s abilities, and underestimating foreign reactions.

Existing scholarship on military mission planning has highlighted decision-making as an important determinant of mission success. Accordingly, an essential

element of explaining military failure, scholars have argued, is misunderstanding one's own military power, combined with a misunderstanding of the adversary and their motivation.³⁶ Based on such erroneous assumptions, leaders often take steps that are difficult to explain with the benefit of hindsight. Mismanaged bureaucratic politics, reflected in the present case by involving only a small group of actors, is an important element of explaining such flawed decision-making. International relations scholar Franz Eder argues that there are four conditions when small groups produce "groupthink" and do not compensate for members' weaknesses and blind spots: cohesiveness, isolation, partiality of the leader, and high stress.³⁷ Given the stakes at hand, all of these conditions are likely to have been present in the current situation. These decision-making pathologies, we argue, are likely to have generated three specific errors: an overestimation of the utility of nuclear weapons, an underestimation of the West's stakes, and a failure to predict the reaction of the Global South.

Overestimating the Utility of Nuclear Weapons

The first error within Russian decision-making was likely to overestimate the utility of nuclear weapons in the Ukrainian war theater. Publicly available information suggests that Moscow's September 2022 threats were uttered before a high-level discussion with senior military leaders was held on what could be achieved with nuclear weapons on the battlefield.³⁸ While the exact conclusions of Russia's internal deliberations are not publicly known, it is fair to assume that a

Moscow's nuclear threats appear to have been issued before any discussion with senior military leaders

thorough analysis must have revealed that relatively little could be achieved through a limited nuclear employment. Most importantly, because of the size of the front and the dispersion of troops, few scenarios could be envisaged in which the use of tactical nuclear weapons could lead to appreciable battlefield advantages.³⁹ In addition, if Russia wanted to later occupy territories in Ukraine, turning them into a nuclear ruin would have made little sense given environmental hazards and potential health consequences.⁴⁰

Moreover, the fallout from such usage could have affected Russia's own troops. At the same time, it was not clear whether Russia could have achieved additional efficiency with nuclear weapons use as compared to its attacks on Ukrainian civilian energy infrastructure by conventional means.⁴¹ A question remains, however, as to whether such information even trickled up the decision-making ladder.

Skepticism about plausible missions for Russia's tactical nuclear weapons is not new, having been noted by experts for a long time.⁴² When Russia nevertheless attempted nuclear coercion, the lack of observable military utility arguably made it relatively easy for Ukraine (as well as for NATO) to call Moscow's bluff.

A contributing factor which enabled the overestimation of the utility of nuclear weapons might lie in the fact that nuclear weapons are broadly popular in Russia, and a symbol of the country's great power status.⁴³ Russian leaders were potentially swayed by the public's support for nuclear deterrence and might have assumed that nuclear threats would not only be tolerated but perhaps also useful for domestic consumption. Sitting in Moscow, leaders might have thought that given the relatively high and positive status which nuclear weapons enjoy in Russian society, invoking a nuclear threat might boost domestic support for the war.

Underestimating the West's Stakes and Support for Ukraine

Another factor which Russia likely underestimated was the possible response from the United States and the European NATO members. Given the strong nuclear aversion among the general public in Europe and the repeatedly expressed desire of European leaders to avoid nuclear use, the Russian leadership might have assumed that Moscow's threats would lead to a moderation in Western support for Ukraine.⁴⁴ The Russian assessment of drivers of European behavior might have informed an expectation that Europeans would also acquiesce to nuclear coercion against Ukraine. This, however, did not turn out to be the case. Instead, in leading European countries the war has been seen as a watershed moment which upended security policy thinking and changed how European publics think about nuclear weapons.⁴⁵ In the nuclear sphere, this led to a process of learning-by-doing about how to manage crises with a nuclear dimension.⁴⁶

Far from acquiescing, Ukraine's allies intensified counter-messaging highlighting the costs Moscow would face if it used nuclear weapons. On September 16, the very day of Putin's first step toward using coercive language, US President Biden warned Russia of the "consequential" response any nuclear escalation would trigger.⁴⁷ In late September, as previously mentioned, Western intelligence services reportedly increased their efforts to detect potential Russian nuclear posture changes.⁴⁸ US National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan also publicly noted the heightened risk of nuclear weapons use and revealed that Washington had "directly, privately, at very high levels" warned the Kremlin against such a step.⁴⁹ In addition, Sullivan and other US government spokespeople continued to publicly emphasize the "catastrophic, severe, strong, profound" consequences the United States and its allies would impose on Russia if it ignored

these warnings.⁵⁰ Officials of US allies adopted similar language.⁵¹ NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg issued public warnings that any nuclear weapons use would lead to severe consequences.⁵² EU High Representative Josep Borrell stated that Russia's army would be "annihilated."⁵³ By leaking information on the Russian generals' discussions, the US intelligence community also publicly signaled to Moscow that it would not be able to use nuclear weapons in a moment of surprise.⁵⁴

The fact that Russia scaled back its threats after being confronted with Western resolve suggests that the West's warnings played a deterrent role. Russia should have considered the stakes which the Western countries see in the conflict, particularly when it comes to the shape of the "future international order." The fact that it did not plausibly contributed to its decision to attempt nuclear coercion.

Response Outside the West

Last but not least, we suspect that Russia underestimated the response to nuclear coercion against Ukraine from non-Western countries. Throughout the conflict, the response from these states has been varied. With the excep-

Unlike the invasion itself, non-Western countries condemned Russia's threats of nuclear use

tion of a small number of countries and their representatives, most non-Western countries have not offered full-throated denunciations of the Russian invasion.⁵⁵ Russia's closest allies in the Global South, such as the other BRICS countries, have been even less resolute in denouncing the war.⁵⁶ Moscow might have assumed that the Global South's reaction to nuclear coercion would be similarly muted.

Quite the contrary. Non-Western countries condemned threats of nuclear use following the Russian coercion attempt. Even if this public messaging lagged somewhat behind the Western response and the language often remained vague, in November 2022 China's leadership denounced the "use of, or threats to use, nuclear weapons"; and the following month India's Prime Minister Modi cancelled the annual summit between the Indian and Russian leaders.⁵⁷ The denunciation even made its way into the G20 communique, a highly unusual public step.⁵⁸ After this flurry of backlash, it is likely that Russia realized that *any* use of nuclear weapons would be met with a very critical stance even from its BRICS partners.⁵⁹ US officials, for example, assessed that Chinese and Indian concerns impacted Russian behavior.⁶⁰

The reactions in the Global South to Russia's attempts at nuclear coercion were potentially driven by two factors. The first one is normative. Russia most likely underestimated the strength of the nuclear taboo at the global level. Scholarship in recent years has underlined that the nuclear taboo is particularly strong at the elite level.⁶¹ The muted response from the Global South when Russia plainly violated many other humanitarian norms might have led Russian leaders to falsely believe that the reaction would be similar in this case.

The second driver of the Global South's reaction could be strategic. It is to be expected that both Xi Jinping and Narendra Modi understood that the West's reaction to either Russia's nuclear use or a successful case of nuclear coercion would be detrimental to Chinese or Indian interests. It is also likely that a world where states can successfully use nuclear coercion to achieve their goals might not be desirable for the rising powers of the Global South, especially given that both China and India are engaged in ongoing rivalries with nuclear-armed states. Finally, neither Beijing nor Delhi would benefit from a lower threshold of nuclear use.

In sum, Russian leaders most likely underestimated the degree to which non-Western countries would react to Russian attempts at nuclear coercion, especially given the low degree to which non-Western countries had otherwise engaged with the war thus far.

Nuclear Coercion Lessons Learned?

Does Russia's short-lived attempt at nuclear coercion against Ukraine teach us anything? Relying on recent scholarship, we argue that coercers have a hard time persuading that stakes warrant nuclear use. Leaders try to fill this credibility gap with bluster and brinkmanship, we reason. Building upon a careful reconstruction of Moscow's actions, we believe that Putin did try to leverage his nuclear arsenal to coerce Zelensky into accepting Russia's annexation of four Ukrainian provinces. Yet, Russia's half-hearted attempt persuaded few—least of all the intended target in Kyiv. We propose that Putin's isolation potentially allowed for group-think to drive decisions. We posit that Moscow probably overestimated how relevant nuclear weapons are for the conduct of the war and misjudged the willingness of both Washington and European countries to accept risks in order to prevent nuclear coercion. Finally, we suggest that Russia might have underestimated global opposition to employing nuclear threats.

Coercers have a hard time persuading that stakes warrant nuclear use

Moscow's attempt at nuclear coercion fizzled. Putin and his associates portrayed the Russian state as entertaining high stakes with respect to the four annexed Ukrainian provinces, thereby suggesting that their defense justified nuclear use. However, potentially for domestic political or strategic reasons, Russian decision-makers made only a half-hearted attempt at nuclear coercion. They refrained from suggesting they were close to a desperate situation—one that would warrant the cost of nuclear use. The Kremlin was also unspecific when uttering nuclear threats, apparently seeking to retain significant leeway in case it had to pull back. When faced with Ukrainian defiance, US warnings, and international opprobrium, Moscow quickly abandoned its nuclear coercion and focused instead on employing conventional weapons to destroy Ukraine's energy infrastructure. Russia's leadership did not attempt to leverage brinkmanship—nuclear weapons were, for example, neither moved around, nor readied for use. While Russia's nuclear attempts triggered much concern at the time, future scholars will likely code this event as a "minor nuclear interaction."

Still, Russia's attempt was not just cheap talk. Moscow did pay a price for it, in both political and symbolic terms. Politically, Russia's attempts at nuclear coercion revealed the stakes which Ukraine, the West, and even non-Western countries, chiefly China, hold in the conflict. Russia received clear indications that others did not and would not accommodate nuclear coercion and would even actively denounce it. In theory, this should create significant incentives pushing Russia to abstain from using this tactic again. Symbolically, Russia's attempts at nuclear coercion were denounced by actors across the world. For political elites who like to see their country as a great power, and for whom nuclear weapons are an important element of that great power status, to be condemned for their nuclear coercion must have been sobering.

These costs unfortunately do not mean that Russia will not try nuclear coercion again. While all experience suggests nuclear coercion is extremely hard, leaders seem to have learned little since 1945.⁶² While deliberating in isolation and failing to rely on an expert bureaucracy, Putin and his associates seem to have reached the same intuitive conclusions Truman held seven decades ago.⁶³ The bad news: the fact that significant theoretical and empirical scholarship would advise leaders to abstain from such coercion attempts means little when nuclear learning is a rare event, and even less for those who neither read nor listen.

But not all the news is bad. Where many analysts long argued that such nuclear crises carry risks of escalation and accidents, this case points in the opposite direction. Realizing its attempts would not succeed absent significant additional investment, the Kremlin quickly and quietly withdrew. However, whether all nuclear interactions in Russia's war against Ukraine will remain characterized by stakes as low as the ones we have seen thus far remains the million-dollar question.

These conclusions have important implications for both scholarship and policymaking. For academic researchers, they suggest that assumptions of nuclear learning, bureaucratic adaptation, and rational decision-making should be taken with a grain of salt. In authoritarian societies, much of the decision-making occurs in a black box. Hence, scholars should be aware that both explanations and predictions which rely heavily on findings grounded in rationalist assumptions are potentially problematic. Also, overreliance on rationalist models which assume only two actors are relevant for nuclear crises appear far-fetched. Russia's attempt at nuclear blackmail shows that normative elements and a broad set of actors play a significant role (as can be seen, for instance, in the response of the international community). Future scholarship should grapple with this complexity.

For policymakers, these conclusions don't bode well. On one hand, when adversaries are prone to misjudge their own and others' capabilities and resolve, deterrence is much harder to achieve. One potentially useful solution is to enhance one's military advantage in order to make it as obvious as possible to the adversary that defeat is the only available outcome. Another might be to noticeably enhance one's resolve. On the other hand, when even obvious signals are prone to be misjudged, the only option is to ensure timely defeat.

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