

That's been a problem in the discussion of the Russian invasion. Media get your attention by writing of escalation! Not to mention: nuclear threats! And: nuclear war! There is a profit motive at work here, one that Russian propagandists exploit by their references to nuclear weapons. Unfortunately, the atmospherics of what should be a sober conversation are brought more by a counting of dollars than by a reckoning of risks.

That is one reason why we should be ashamed of our discussion of nuclear war, but not the main one. Our nuclear talk is a way to claim victimhood, and then to blame the actual victims. Once we turn our attention to a hypothetical exchange of missiles, we get to imagine that we are the victims. Suddenly the actual war no longer seems to matter, since our lives (we imagine) are at risk. And the Ukrainians seem to be at fault. If only they would stop fighting, then we could all be safe. This, of course, is exactly how Russian propagandists want us to reason. And it is wrong.

Not just morally wrong, though of course it is that. Actual Ukrainians are actually fighting and dying in a war that serves our security in countless ways -- including by reducing the risk of nuclear war, as I'll discuss below. And we spend our time imagining our own victimhood?

Yielding to Russian nuclear talk is also wrong, and embarrassingly so, as strategic thinking. It is an example of a narcissistic fantasy that looms over discussions of American foreign policy: the fantasy of omnipotent submission. This is the notion, birthed in American exceptionalism and impatience, that since America is the power behind everything, all will be well if America does nothing. If we do what the Russian propagandists want, and do nothing for Ukraine, then (in this fantasy) there will be no nuclear war.

In the fantasy of omnipotent submission, America has the magical power, by way of complete inaction, to restore a peaceful status quo where we could all sleep soundly. But America has no such power. And there is no way to do nothing.

American policymakers have to act within a certain setting, formed by many actors in complex interactions, in which doing nothing will always have consequences, just as doing something will always have consequences. Doing nothing is, in fact, always amounts to doing something, and usually (as in the case of Russian invasion) it is the wrong something! In this case, doing nothing (to support Ukraine) would increase the risk of nuclear war. By doing something specific, by supplying arms to Ukraine, the United States has assisted the Ukrainians in decreasing the chances of nuclear war.

I can only make this argument if you will follow me into the realm of strategic thinking. We have to do this step by step.

The fantasy of omnipotent submission builds and releases anxiety. Someone in Russia issues a threat; feckless commentators and propagandists amplify it; and then we seek a quick way to release the fear. Or: the United States send weapons; feckless commentators and propagandists speak of escalation!; and, again, we seek a quick way to release the fear. When this becomes a habit, it takes the place of thinking about the risks and benefits policy.

In psychological terms, the fantasy of omnipotent submission is understandable. So let us understand it as psychology -- and also understand that the Russians deploy it as psychology. The fantasy is used against us. We need to be thoughtful about it in order to resist it. And as we try to work our way out from under it, we must realize that it is there to prevent strategic thinking.

Mushrooms, near Kyiv

So, deep breath. Russia has an interest in anxiety; media has an interest in anxiety; your body can get locked in anxiety.

Getting over that is the hard part. Once we do, the strategic thinking is the easy part. It starts in the real world. Russia invaded Ukraine. That happened. We cannot transport ourselves back to the world of 2021. (Even if we somehow could, we would just be in a world where Russia was about to invade Ukraine...). Operating within a world where the invasion happened, the soundest nuclear policy is to help Ukraine win a conventional war. This is for four reasons.

First, it would be a disaster for everyone if Russian nuclear blackmail succeeded. If any nuclear state can coerce others by references to its nuclear stockpile, then foreign policy of any kind becomes impossible, non-nuclear states will always have to yield, and nuclear states will run the world. If Russian nuclear blackmail succeeds, we can expect not only more Russian nuclear blackmail, but also nuclear blackmail from other nuclear powers. We can also expect that other countries will build nuclear weapons to resist future blackmail. And so support of Ukraine decreases the chances of nuclear war by showing that nuclear blackmail does not work.

Second, global nuclear proliferation should be prevented. The risk of nuclear war has a mathematical character. The more countries have nuclear weapons, the more likely it becomes that they will be used. Russian policy pushes in the direction of nuclear proliferation. Ukraine actually gave up its nuclear weapons. Then Russia invaded, in 2014 and again in 2022. The lesson for non-nuclear states is that they will need nuclear weapons to deter Russian invasion, or invasion by any nuclear power. The way to prevent that conclusion is for Ukraine to win a conventional war. And so support of Ukraine reduces the chances of nuclear war by reducing the likelihood of nuclear proliferation.

Third, the European scenario for nuclear confrontation should be made as unlikely as possible. That scenario is a large war between Russia and NATO, in which there would be nuclear powers on both sides. In its Soviet and then its later Russian variant, this vision has haunted the minds of Americans and Europeans for decades. Thanks to Ukrainian resistance, such a war is far less likely than it has been. The forces Russia might have used in an attack on a NATO member are [SS1] being destroyed in Ukraine. Even in the scenario where Russia somehow does mount an offensive against a NATO state, any temptation to use nuclear weapons in response has been reduced by the knowledge that Russia can be defeated in a conventional war. And so support of Ukraine reduces the chance of nuclear war making the European scenario less likely.

Fourth, the Asian scenario for nuclear confrontation should be made as unlikely as possible. In the last couple of decades, the possibility of a Sino-American confrontation over Taiwan has dominated discussions in Washington. Americans have

been frustrated and frightened by what they take to be the inevitability of the confrontation. The idea that some other country might deflect it was never part of the debate. But that is happening. By resisting Russia, Ukrainians have forced Beijing to recognize that offensive operations are risky and can end badly. Beijing has by no means lost interest in Taiwan, but it is safe to say that any drastic move has been delayed, at least for a few years.

And these are an important few years. A year ago, when Russia invaded, the conventional wisdom was still that China was a rising power. In the broader American thinking about all this, this was the essence of the problem: a rising power (China) must confront a declining power (the U.S.). Now it is much less clear that China is a rising power. The Ukrainians have delayed the most dangerous scenario; and in doing so, they might have gotten us through the most dangerous moment. Notably, they have done all this without confronting China. And so support of Ukraine reduces the chance of nuclear war by making the Asian scenario much less likely.

If we want to reduce the risk of global nuclear war, then we should arm Ukrainians. Doing so reduces the appeal of nuclear blackmail, the risk of nuclear proliferation, and the likelihood of the scenarios.

If what we have in mind is a local use by Russia of nuclear weapons in Ukraine, this is a different question. It is impossible to rule out. But here the risk is one that the Ukrainians have a right to discuss, since it is their land and their people. Over and over again, they have made plain that the delivery of western conventional weapons is their priority. One could say that Ukrainians are wrongly evaluating the risks: this, though, would smack of the kind of colonial arrogance that persuaded so many of us that Ukraine would not resist, or would be quickly defeated if they did. The Ukrainian leadership knows what it is doing. And they are doing what their voters want them to do.

Rather than just listening to Ukrainians about their evaluation of risk of local nuclear use, we sometimes seek Putin's inner thoughts. When people imagine the use of Russian nuclear weapons in Ukraine, a certain weird empathy comes into play: Putin will feel that his back is against the wall, that he has no choice.

If we treat that as a hypothesis, we see that it has been disproven. Russia lost the battles of Kyiv, Kharkiv, and Kherson without using nuclear weapons. Russia has suffered almost a year of surprising defeats of various kinds, not least the collapse of its entire war plan, which involved overthrowing the Ukrainian government and controlling the entire country. And yet: no nuclear weapon use. Instead, each defeat generates stories about how Russia was not actually defeated. That is worth noting. The escalation one actually sees is narrative. It takes more and more work for Russians to explain defeat as victory. But so far they have been up to the task.

Wars end when the political power of rulers is threatened, and we have not yet reached that point. When we do, Putin will feel the threat in Moscow, not in Ukraine. In such a situation, using nuclear weapons in Ukraine will not help him. Withdrawing conventional forces from Ukraine for a power struggle in Russia might. During that power struggle, no Russian struggling for control of the Kremlin will admit that the war in Ukraine was lost. Instead, contenders for power will compete with their stories of how grand the victory actually was. My expectation is that the next Russian leader (or Putin if he remains) will claim that Russia won an extraordinary victory over NATO by eliminating NATO forces in Ukraine before they had a chance to cross into Russian territory.

In both the global and the Ukrainian settings, the Russian calculation is that nuclear talk will induce Europeans and North Americans to deter themselves from sending weapons. But deploying talk is very different from deploying weapons. Indeed, it is an alternative to doing so. We too easily assume that the word must be the antecedent to the deed. But the word is the deed. When deploying nuclear talk is the policy, then actually deploying a nuclear weapon undoes the policy.

The implied threat is no longer available, once used. And the Russian leadership knows that the Americans and everyone else would send more far, far weapons to Ukraine were Russia to use a battlefield nuclear weapon.

The use of a nuclear weapon on the Ukrainian battlefield would have far greater costs than this for Russia: in the moment, and for years and decades down the line. Moscow would lose even what tentative support it has around the world.

It would forfeit its ability to present itself as a victim in international relations. Its leaders would know that they would be remembered as criminals and pariahs. And that is not even to mention what would usually be mentioned first: direct deterrence. Should Russia break the taboo of nuclear use, its own status as a military power would be dramatically compromised by the military response of others.

Nuclear weapons are symbolic, for different people in different ways. I want to close on the question of status, from the Russian point of view. People sometimes say that a nuclear power cannot lose a war. This that makes historians cry into their pillows. The United States is a nuclear power that loses wars on a regular basis. The Soviet Union lost in Afghanistan, Russia lost the first Chechen war. The French nuclear test in 1960 did not save it from defeat in Algeria, any more than British nuclear weapons preserved the Empire. The use of a battlefield nuclear weapon will not win the war for Russia in Ukraine, but it would be a tremendous blow to Russian status, which is something that Russian leaders do care about.

This requires some explanation. When this war began, the two things that made Russians believe that they were a superpower were the army and the nuclear arsenal. The first source of status is now in question. If Russia uses a nuclear weapon, that is an admission that its army has been beaten. So the first source of status has been conceded -- along with the second. The moment Russia uses a nuclear weapon, other countries, including those with superior economies and scientific establishments, will build their own nuclear arsenals. When that happens, Russia ceases to be a superpower, even in the minds of Russians. That, for Russian elites, is the one intolerable outcome of this war. It is far worse than withdrawing troops from Ukraine -- for that there will always be a story. There is no story that can restore the sense of superpower status after it is lost.

One-year anniversary clickbait!

It has been almost a year since Russia began its full-scale invasion of Ukraine. The magic of anniversaries assures that

there will be many articles about Ukraine on February 24th, no doubt some of them reflective and interesting. I will nevertheless predict that there will be a number of essays along the lines of: "Hey, Let's Keep Talking About Nuclear War."

It is also safe to say that no one will publish an op-ed along the lines of "We Talked About Putin's Mind For a Year, And We Were Wrong "; or "Despite Our Reflexive Use of the Word 'Escalation,' It Never Happened"; and certainly not "A Year After Russia's Invasion, Ukraine has Reduced the Risk of Nuclear Conflict Around the World."

But that is the most important thing to say about nuclear war: it's not happening.

[Vitor Oliveira Jorge](#) [15 hr ago](#)

Fantastic! It is a great pleasure to receive each text of yours. Thank you so much for your explanations. Many people seem not to see what is at stake here! Ukraine MUST win this.

All best. With great admiration

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[Ofoeti](#) [15 hr ago](#)

Thank you for this essay. I am educated middle class, but often dumbfounded by politics, and weary of the chaos that appears daily among TV pundits. You have written rationally about one of my biggest fears (among all the other fears political strategists whip up). No doubt this too will be batted around by partisans, but having a thoughtful opinion is extremely important to me.

Nuclear war! Why it isn't happening finns att läsa här: <https://snyder.substack.com/p/nuclear-war>

[Timothy Snyder | Substack](#)