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## **Russia-Ukraine war brings nuclear risk to level not seen since Cuban missile crisis**

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russian-ukraine-war-brings-nuclear-risk-to-level-not-seen-since-cuban-missile-crisis

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# Russian-Ukraine war brings nuclear risk to level not seen since Cuban missile crisis

By [ERIKA SIMPSON](#) OCTOBER 10, 2022

Winter is coming so Russia's chokehold on European gas, superior tank manoeuvres on snow, and increased mobilization effort foretell a conventional advantage.



Last month, Putin's thinly veiled nuclear threat as he ordered a partial mobilization of 300,000 reservists stated that Russia would "use all the means at our disposal" to defend its territory, writes Erika Simpson. *Photograph courtesy of Flickr*

The Russian-Ukraine crisis may pose a greater [risk of nuclear use](#) than the Cuban missile crisis 60 years ago this month. According to the Ukrainian president's head office, [Andriy Yermak](#) the country's intelligence agencies believe there is a "very high" risk that Russia might use tactical nuclear weapons. Experts caution that Moscow's leader is "[desperate,](#)" and like a cornered rat, President Vladimir Putin may use nuclear weapons to force the enemy to back down, a part of Russian military doctrine known as [escalate to de-escalate](#).

Last month, Putin's thinly veiled nuclear threat as he ordered a [partial mobilization](#) of 300,000 reservists stated that Russia would "use all the means at our disposal" to

defend its territory. But the White House's warnings have been stark, and U.S. President Joe Biden made it clear at the UN General Assembly that [Russia's threats would be opposed](#). More recently, he warned the world could face "Armageddon," assessing the nuclear risk at its [highest in 60 years](#). U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken, in an interview on the sidelines of the assembly, confirmed that the United States sent warnings to Russia to [steer clear of nuclear war](#). Former CIA director and retired four-star army general David Petraeus [explicitly warned](#) the U.S. and its allies would destroy Russia's troops and equipment in Ukraine—as well as sink its Black Sea fleet—if the Russian president uses nuclear weapons.

War is folly and assuredly Putin's inner circle must be questioning the ill-fated decision to attack Kiev to topple Volodymyr Zelenskyy's government. Putin's attempt to liberate the Donbas region by sheer force, not persuasion, and sham [legislation](#) purporting to formally annex four Ukrainian regions—Donetsk, Kherson, Luhansk, and Zaporizhzhia—cannot obscure the reality that Russia's military does not yet control the war-torn territory and Russia's reign would be tenuous for generations to come.

Ukrainian troops are retaking more territory in regions illegally annexed by Russia and making [breakthroughs in the east and south](#), recapturing villages and liberating settlements. However, Russian forces [struck targets](#) far from the front line last week, purportedly using self-destructing, Iran-supplied drones to hit the city of Bila Tserkva, south of Kiev. The entire Crimean peninsula, annexed in 2014, is also under constant threat due to Ukraine's sinking of the [Russian warship Moskva](#), the flagship of the Russian Navy's Black Sea fleet. Russian submarines might not be able to safely harbor there and might have to be redeployed to the Arctic and Baltic Sea.

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However, Ukraine will receive even more sophisticated weapons, in part because the horror of discovering [mass graves](#) and tortured Ukrainian bodies lessens the United States' reluctance to ratchet up the conflict by filling Ukraine's war chest with [billions of dollars of military aid](#).

Forebodingly, Putin's speeches are replete with references to the [neo-Nazis](#) and the neo-Nazi coup-appointed regime in Ukraine. The leader's preoccupation with defending the motherland from "[Western pseudo-values](#)" may signal a return in his mind to the Siege of Leningrad, where he was born and over a million died. How to defy and reassure a paranoid, violent man who holds all the levers of power and is neither subject to democracy nor beholden to others in his inner cabal?

History is replete with evidence that men fear knives borne by men within the inner circle who stab the strongest in the back. As [Thomas Hobbes](#) warns, "the weakest has strength enough to kill the strongest by secret machination or confederacy." The account of the Last Supper in the King James Bible highlights Jesus's disciple [Judas's betrayal](#) of him. Former U.S. president Donald Trump was betrayed by close aides, from [Steve Bannon](#) to his [daughter Ivanka](#). There are legions of legendary stories of betrayal because, in their pursuit of power, leaders cast aside sycophants who become marginalized, secret enemies.

Irrational, vengeful followers may fully support decisions by autocratic men, like Putin, North Korea's Kim Jong-Un, or Trump to use nuclear weapons. But the [nuclear](#)

[taboo](#) has become much stronger since the Cuban missile crisis because so much more is known about the effects of [nuclear winter](#), even from the use of 50 tactical nuclear weapons, merely 0.3 per cent of the world's arsenal. [Russian doctrine](#) allows local commanders to use tactical nuclear weapons to stave off defeat, or loss of Russian territory. But if Russia crosses the line, Jake Sullivan, the U.S. national security adviser to the White House disclosed the United States will [respond decisively](#).

China's Xi Jinping and India's Narendra Modi are preaching caution to Putin directly, [not mincing their words](#). At the same time, [opposition is growing](#) in Russian cities and remote villages in far-flung regions to mobilizing untrained men to become more cannon fodder. Putin's recent [claim](#) that the United States created a [precedent](#) for the use of nuclear weapons with its bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki in 1945 seemed to imply that if the West continues to support Kyiv and send weapons to Ukraine, he could resort to the nuclear option.

As each day passes, the nuclear threats Putin has made, veiled in self-pity and grandiosity, make the threat of an above-ground demonstration shot of a nuclear weapon in Ukraine's east more credible. Putin's aggressive threats lower the threshold for nuclear use and increase the risk of nuclear conflict and global catastrophe. The likelihood of nuclear use today may be more—or less—than it was back in late February, but unlikely events happen all the time. Nuclear threats are bluffs—until the catastrophic day they are not.

Nevertheless, the norm of non-use can act as a powerful restraint on leaders, [just as it did](#) in 1962 during the [executive committee's decision-making process](#) in the United States. Once the Cuban missile crisis ended, significant steps that led to nuclear disarmament were taken, including the 1968 [Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons](#) and the 1967 [Outer Space Treaty](#). If this crisis ends safely, frightened world leaders will need to strongly promote stability, peace, and security.

*Erika Simpson is a professor of international politics at Western University, the president of the Canadian Peace Research Association, and the co-author of How to De-escalate Dangerous Nuclear Weapons and Force Deployments in Europe.*

*The Hill Times*

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