

NUCLEAR DIPLOMACY IN THE CONTEXT OF THE RUSSO-UKRAINIAN WAR

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Abstract: *The Russian aggression against Ukraine resurrected old nuclear fears from their grave. This is an understandable and somehow unavoidable effect, yet a thorough study of nuclear weapons and the interaction that they enable is important, allowing decision-makers and the public to avoid costly mistakes. This paper is designed as an essay about nuclear weapons, alongside strategic relations as a context for the Russo-Ukrainian War, focusing on nuclear safety, coercive diplomacy and security regimes. The main conclusions are that the risk of accidents remains, the fear of escalation is not always effective as a foreign policy tool, and that international institutions have seriously been weakened.*

Keywords: *nuclear safety; deterrence; compellence; nuclear weapons; nuclear proliferation; security regimes.*

Introduction

Why does the nuclear context matter? Mainstream strategic studies argue that conflicts conducted under the nuclear shadow are restricted by the existence of these arsenals, whether explicitly or tacitly (T. C. Schelling [1966] 2008, George, Simons and Hall 1971). Moreover, coercive diplomacy employs nuclear threats to avoid certain results or to push for specific effects, producing a range of consequences (T. C. Schelling [1966] 2008, George, Simons and Hall 1971). Additional considerations include Moscow’s propaganda and cognitive warfare (“the Russian steamroller”), as well as wider implications for global security, taking into account the renewed great power rivalry that contains a nuclear dimension.

This development led to a revival of earlier, Cold War-era ideas within strategic studies. Academic debates over the merits of deterrence and compellence ended in a limbo, following the dissolution of the Soviet Union. Consequently, we are left with serious doubts about the way interests are defined, threats are perceived, and how social representations of hostilities are developed, during periods of intense crisis, and about the best ways to handle these issues. Therefore, to study and enlarge the classical ideas about the use of force as a threat is also useful from a scholarly point of view.

This paper has two goals. The first one is a description of nuclear issues surrounding the Russo-Ukrainian War during the interval winter 2024/2025-winter 2025/2026. The interval was chosen based on the premise that these subjects require more academic attention, and that they may also help the decision-makers and the public to make better informed choices. The other aim is to link contemporary events to wider, theoretical questions about the use of force and threats in world politics, in general.

Several clarifications on conceptual foundations are needed. The study of nuclear topics (such as deterrence, limited war, compellence) is fraught by notorious methodological and descriptive problems, including the difficulty of discerning effects due to counterfactuality and the lack of reliable facts (Starr 2002, loc 1011-1015). Nevertheless, the academic study of security relies on the premise that reason helps us better understand conflicts and the employment of force (Morgenthau 2007[1948], 44-49). Therefore, an essayistic approach that problematizes the nuclear context of the Russo-Ukrainian War remains justifiable, if it relies on accepted intellectual frameworks.

The paper rests on an eclectic conceptual framework. It draws on rational deterrence theory and the literature on international regimes (T. C. Schelling [1966] 2008, Mayer, Rittberger și Zürn 2002[1993], 391-430, Morgan 2003). The hypothesis is that interest-oriented behavior, and the ability to make calculations under conditions of high uncertainty, can help us to understand several issues in the context of the Russo-Ukrainian War. This perspective is compatible with alternative interpretations of the same topics, close to Weberian ideal-type approach (Weber 2011[1919], Morgenthau 2007[1948], 44-55).

The uncertainty characteristic of conflicts also influences contemporary narrations. The data is gathered from news media and official sources, occasionally combined with expert evaluation and scientific studies where available, covering the period up to February 24, 2026. To materialize the paper two goals of descriptions and theorization, the essay advances three research objectives: first, to clarify the question of nuclear safety taking into account the Russian air campaign against the Ukrainian energy system; second, to examine the practice of coercive diplomacy that reunites issues such as compellence or deterrence (George, Simons and Hall 1971, 18-19, 22-25, Art 1980, 3-35); and third, and to elaborate on wider considerations regarding arms control and disarmament. The structure of the paper reflects these objectives accordingly.

1. Nuclear safety

Nuclear safety remains an issue, in the context of the Russo-Ukrainian War. There are 15 active reactors in 4 functional Nuclear Power Plants (NPP), and one of them, the most important, of Zaporizhzhia is under Russian control since 2022 (WNA 2026). The Chornobyl site was the scene of several fights, with the Russian forces digging trenches in the radioactive zone, until they had to withdraw (Plokhly 2023). Overall, critical infrastructure in Ukraine is at risk, as witnessed by the flooding of the Nova Kakhovka dam (Plokhly 2023).

Since the beginning of the full scale Russian aggression against Ukraine, nuclear safety has been a serious problem and several worrying incidents happened during the last year. On 14 February 2025, a drone hit the New Safe Container that covers the infamous Unit 4 from the Chornobyl NPP. No radiation emission was registered (IAEA 2025). On 4 July 2025, there was a power loss for the Zaporizhzhia NPP (IAEA 2025). And on 23 September 2025, another power loss was registered at the Zaporizhzhia NPP (IAEA 2025).

Lately, these worries have intensified, because of the ongoing Russian campaign against Ukraine's energy infrastructure. Russia's advances are very slow (70 meters/day or less), and it compensates by negotiations, and by the renewed air strikes directed towards the civilian power system (Jone and McCabe 2026). The campaign aims to increase the civilian costs of the war, and to press the Ukrainian authorities and the Western countries. It targets the secondary power stations. Many link the NPP to the consumers. Almost half of Ukraine's energy comes from its NPPs (WNA 2026, Culverwell 2006, Belkour 2026).

From a diplomatic point of view, the problem is that the aggressor is also a permanent member of the UN Security Council. Still, there is the global interest to avoid another Chernobyl disaster, and the nonproliferation regime provides a useful service, in this case. The rule is that the NPP should be safe from attacks. IAEA continued to deploy a team at the Zaporizhzhia NPP, and to maintain contacts with both sides (WNA 2023, IAEA 2025).

2. Coercive nuclear diplomacy

The Russo-Ukrainian War has involved the aggression of a nuclear weapon state against a country that had previously gave up its inherited arsenal. Putin's regime has also cooperated closely with another nuclear power, China, while the coalition supporting Kyiv included three nuclear weapon states (US, France, and Britain). In addition, North Korea, which has developed these

armaments in the last decades, has helped Moscow during the conflict. It is not surprising that old Cold War concepts, such as nuclear deterrence, compellence, and escalation management, have regained their practical importance (Schelling [1966] 2008, Powell 2015, Gross Stein 2023).

Several explanations may be advanced. One relates to the ongoing rivalry among great powers, especially between China and the United States. While the tone is more polite since Donald Trump returned to the presidency, the fundamentals remain, one of them being the military modernization and growth promoted by the Beijing leadership. This process entails a salient nuclear dimension, that created worries of China joining US and Russia as a third major nuclear state (Kristensen, et al. 2025, U.S. Department of Defense 2025).

Another explanation derives from the specific context of the Russo-Ukrainian War. Nuclear threats have been made: statements by president Putin, positions taken by Russian public figures, tests, the deployment in Belarus etc. (Brands 2024, 1-14, Perkovich 2026). There is an ongoing debate about their meaning and value, yet some agreement exists that the ones uttered in autumn 2022 may have been serious, following the two successful Ukrainian counteroffensives around Kharkiv and Kherson (Brands 2024, 1-14, Perkovich 2026). It is also reasonable to assume that there may be “known unknowns”, discrete or tacit communications between nuclear powers (T. Schelling 2000[1960], Rumsfeld 2002).

The presence of nuclear weapons also structures political and diplomatic setting of the Russo-Ukrainian War. It is reasonable to assume that they define its limits, and fears of nuclear escalation were expressed by officials, especially by the US President, Joe Biden, and by his successor, Donald Trump (Gross Stein 2022, Gross Stein 2023, 29-50, Brands 2024, 1-14, Shake 2024, 156-172, Roth și Gambino 2025). These restraints imply that Russia does not target NATO countries supplying Ukraine, while Western countries do not intervene directly (Gross Stein 2022, Gross Stein 2023, 29-50, Brands 2024, 1-14, Shake 2024, 156-172, Roth și Gambino 2025). For Ukraine, the conflict is a total war (Gross Stein 2022, Gross Stein 2023, 29-50, Brands 2024, 1-14, Shake 2024, 156-172, Roth și Gambino 2025).

Therefore, the American general policy towards supporting Ukraine was structured also as a risk management strategy (Gross Stein 2023, Shake 2024). More than that, it is difficult to prove, and the question of doing too little, or too much will probably remain unanswered for the time being. What is more plausible is that, despite its nuclear threats, Russia has failed to stop the increase in assistance from the West, yet it has probably slowed down the pace, in comparison with a scenario in which such threats were absent (Brands 2024). The question of support was restated during the second Trump administration (NATO 2025).

Other conclusions from the Cold War conflicts were reasserted. For example, nuclear deterrence and compellence face credibility issues, while escalation dominance is difficult to apply since nuclear weapons are blunt instruments, perceived as genocidal weapons (George, Simons and Hall 1971, Tannenwald 2007). This is largely because nuclear coercion is more credible (and presumably more effective) when survival is at stake. It is also easy to overstate the importance of these activities (Perkovich 2026).

The balance of interests, goals and or political will also is important, in this escalation management, a form of coercive diplomacy (Schweller 2012). Russia is more interested in the war than the West (Powell 2015, Snyder 2022, Thayer 2022). For Ukraine, survival is at stake, while for Russia is a war of choice (Powell 2015, Snyder 2022, Thayer 2022, Brands 2024, 1-14). Thus, the result is an equilibrium of will between the West-Ukraine partnership and Russia (Powell 2015, Snyder 2022, Thayer 2022, Brands 2024, 1-14).

3. Nuclear security regimes

International relations are not only patterned but also often normatively regulated. To this end, states have created regimes which are “principles, norms, rules and decision-making procedures in an issue area” (Krasner 1982, 185, Jervis 1982, 357-378, Ungureanu 2006, 233-242). There are two

types of nuclear security regimes, based on their objectives: arms control and non-proliferation (Baylis 2019, 220-237)¹. The degree of order within these sectors ebbs and flows under the influence of many factors, such as power, interest, and state identities (Krasner 1982, Wendt 1992).

At present, nuclear security regimes are in a state of crisis. Some are still influential (the Non-Proliferation Treaty), even a few of the more specialized still hold (The Partial Test Ban Treaty or the Outer Space Treaty), albeit contested for a variety of political and strategic reasons (Baylis 2019, 233-242, Gray 2007, United Nations Office for Disarmament Affairs 2005). Several treaties have been disbanded (denounced, expired or suspended), including New Start, the ABM Treaty, and the INF Treaty (Baylis 2019, 233-242, U.S Department of State 2022). The nuclear arms control sector, in particular, remains unregulated, reflecting a more general trend of formal regimes weakening.

This crisis has affected the rules, and the decision-making procedures, but not the principles and norms (Krasner 1982, 185-205). No one argues that nuclear strategic instability is a good thing, and even US President, Donald Trump is cautious on the issue of large nuclear arsenal, as discussed above. A general war between great powers is still as unwanted as it was during the Cold War. Therefore, we are witnessing a change within the nuclear security regimes for arms control, and, up to a point, a weakening of these partial orders (the abandoning of INF was a case for both trends) (Krasner 1982, 185-205).

The most invoked causes are changes in the aggregate or sectoral distribution of power and global or regional conflicts. For example, the great power rivalry between US and China, which has led to a renewed arms race in the Asia-Pacific region with a nuclear component, Russia's policies in Europe, especially the aggression against Ukraine, or issues of ideology and prestige. These trends led to the expectations of a "third nuclear age" (Colin Gray), defined by a bipolar or multipolar power distribution and the differentiation between aggregate power and nuclear capabilities, which means that small or medium powers may overcompensate by intensive nuclear armament (Walton 2019, 202-219)². Under these conditions, a threat is the renewed nuclear proliferation (Brands 2024, 1-14)³.

There is, however, a measure of positive perspective. Taking into account that the principles and norms of the arms control regime still holds, making strategic stability the main goal of the nuclear strategies, Thomas Schelling's distinction of tacit versus formal orders sheds more light on the current situation (T. Schelling 2000[1960], Stein 1990, 25-54)⁴. This implies that, with the basic understanding, reasserted in some official documents, that a nuclear war can not be won, a formal agreement may be supplanted, for a while by the convergence of expectations (U.S. Mission Geneva 2022)⁵. The situation is still problematic, as it leaves space for disagreement, while personalists diplomacy is not enduring, therefore, maybe the often proposed trilateral arms control agreement (US, China, Russia) may represent an acceptable solution for long-term stability (Baklitskiy 2020)⁶.

¹ Arms control is about restraint, while non-proliferation includes an element of disarmament, therefore, of reduction of abolition of nuclear weapons (Baylis 2019, 222).

² Though the ongoing controversies about non-proliferation and the Iran case are closer to the second nuclear age, when the threats were defined in terms of smaller powers and international terrorism (Walton 2019, 202-219).

³ An alternative explanation is ideological. Nationalist, and populist leaders are skeptical of international organizations and experts (Müller 2017). Simona Soare drew a similar conclusion about theories of hegemonic decline that influenced regime theory (Soare 2013).

⁴ During a debate, Diana Mărgărit suggested that liberal distrust of regulations may also be at hand (Mărgărit 2025). Oran Young theorized that self-interest based regimes can be established by spontaneous interaction or negotiations (Young 1989).

⁵ An additional factor is the existence of surveillance satellites (Baklitskiy 2020). Another is the nuclear taboo, the moral disgust evoked by the use of nuclear weapons (Tannenwald 2007). That it has effects was made obvious by the reaction, in autumn 2022, at the risk of Russia using tactical nuclear weapons, when the Ukrainian forces made significant gains. Even China and India, its partners and allies, voiced opposition (Brands 2024).

⁶ Spontaneous or tacit agreements are vulnerable during periods of instability, or to information and transaction costs (Keohane 1982, Young 1989, 94).

Conclusions

This paper problematized the nuclear issues surrounding the Russo-Ukrainian War. It followed an essayistic approach because the explanations, in this domain, are counterfactual and data is often a matter of speculation. Rational deterrence theory and the international regime studies furnished the intellectual framework that was used to understand this context. The paper aimed at description and generalization, following three objectives.

First, nuclear safety remains a problem. Several incidents were registered during 2025, following similar occurrences since the start of the war. The current Russian air campaign against the Ukrainian energy system targeted power substations, which may put the NPPs in danger. While the AIEA continued its efforts at monitoring and mediations, the fact that the aggressor is a permanent member of the UN Security Council compounds the issue.

Second, the effects of Russia's nuclear coercion are ambiguous. Available evidence is insufficient to ascertain how, and to what extent, the decision-makers were influenced by Moscow's threats, with the credibility of which was problematic, except maybe for autumn 2022. Western support still goes on today. It represents a relevant factor, but it has not been decisive and it has not brought by itself the territorial gains that Russian leaders may have expected.

Third, the nuclear security regimes are in shambles, although a tacit understanding probably still exists. While the West is preoccupied with European and Middle Eastern topics, China is increasing its nuclear arsenal on a significant scale, alarming the decision-makers in Washington, as Pentagon's report suggest. The major arms control treaties have expired, or have been denounced, and it is uncertain whether they will be renewed soon. The aggression against Ukraine has weakened the non-proliferation regime, showing that a non-weapon state can be attacked by a nuclear owner, placing the UN in a diplomatically difficult position.

Overall, nuclear topics have played a significant role, yet they have formed only the context for the Russo-Ukrainian War. Nuclear weapons have not been used, and this situation will continue in the future, for reasons of prestige (a nuclear strike meaning a conventional failure), and potentially also because of the taboo identified by Nina Tannenwald. In contemporary international politics, these tools have made a partial comeback, as support for deterrent strategies, and as means of arms races. The study of their implications is important, as the world becomes more conflictual.

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