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Escalation Ladder and the Game of Chances in the Ukraine War of 2022

Abstract

The paper refers to the most recent developments during the 2022–2023 Ukraine war, analysed from the perspective of selected insights derived from deterrence studies, most notably the escalation ladder. The reason for the publication is to point out dangerous escalatory steps in the context of Putin’s Russia-Ukrainian war, including the abolishment of strategic arms control and tactical nuclear weapons deployment in the EU neighbourhood. V. Putin’s regime’s steps towards seizure or control of Ukraine’s largest nuclear power plant were discussed internationally as a severe humanitarian hazard. The pre-1989 deterrence debate could add a vital research perspective missing in the analytic frames of the New Cold War. Notably,

the developments of the 2023 conduct of the Ukraine war with the support of the West countering the impact of a nuclear crisis scenario (tactical arsenal employment) could be analysed in the context of earlier concepts of limited war (1960s), as well as further elaborations on conditions of mutual vulnerability.

Keywords: The New Cold War, Ukrainian conflict, escalation ladder

Drabina eskalacyjna a gra losów w ukraińskiej wojnie 2022 roku

Abstrakt

Artykuł odnosi się do najnowszych wydarzeń, które rozegrały się w trakcie wojny w Ukrainie w latach 2022–2023, analizowanych z perspektywy wybranych spostrzeżeń pochodzących z badań nad odstraszeniem, w szczególności w ramach koncepcji drabiny eskalacyjnej. Powodem publikacji jest chęć zwrócenia uwagi na niebezpieczne kroki eskalacyjne w kontekście rozpętanej przez Putina wojny rosyjsko-ukraińskiej, w tym zniesienie kontroli zbrojeń strategicznych i rozmieszczenie taktycznej broni jądrowej w sąsiedztwie UE. Działania reżimu Władymira Putina zmierzające do przejęcia największej ukraińskiej elektrowni jądrowej lub uzyskania nad nią kontroli wzbudziły międzynarodową dyskusję na temat poważnego zagrożenia humanitarne. Debata na temat odstraszenia sprzed 1989 r. może wnieść ważną perspektywę badawczą, której dotychczas zabrakło w ramach analizy nowej zimnej wojny. W szczególności, rozwój sytuacji w 2023 r. w zakresie prowadzenia wojny w Ukrainie przy wsparciu Zachodu zapobiegającego realizacji scenariusza kryzysu nuklearnego (wykorzystanie arsenału taktycznego) można analizować w kontekście wcześniejszych koncepcji wojny lokalnej (lata 60.), a także dalszych opracowań dotyczących warunków wzajemnej podatności na zagrożenia.

Słowa kluczowe: Nowa zimna wojna, konflikt w Ukrainie, drabina eskalacyjna

Introduction

The research goals of the paper are centred on the possibility of matching the escalatory steps of the competing parts of the Ukraine contest with the earlier Cold War understandings of the escalation ladder. An escalation of a conventional conflict to the stage of a nuclear one was a leading hazard of excellent power rivalry since the August 1945 bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. The threat of nuclear weapon use was later present during the Korean War of 1950–1953 (it related to a strike against China), during the Suez War of 1956 (USSR threats directed against Britain and France), or obviously in the case of the Cuban missile crisis of October 1962. As Graham Allison summarised, the latter crisis of particular significance was resolved due to strong U.S. determination in pressure to remove Soviet missiles from Cuba, backed by strategic advantage, allowing at the time to imagine a “nuclear holocaust” against the USSR (62). Further efforts of the Soviet Union to neutralise U.S. advantage led to the strategic equilibrium and Strategic Arms Limitation Talks, which concluded with the 1972 agreement. The *détente* era of the 1970s ended with the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan (1979), opening a decade of new bipolar hostility. Despite the geopolitical breakthrough in 1989 and the dissolution of the USSR in December 1991, the strategic balance was maintained and formalised through the Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty, renewed in 2010 with the lowest limits of 1550 deployed strategic vehicles. The latter agreements were suspended by V. Putin in early 2023, an escalatory measure in the course of the Ukraine conflict.

The New Cold War analytical framework to understand the growing hostility between Russia and the West under the increasingly authoritarian Putin regime was introduced in 2008 by Edward Lucas, and the validity of such an approach was confirmed by the Russian annexation of Crimea in 2014. Edward Lucas elaborated on the New Cold War environment with a conclusion that only the precise deterrence capability of NATO could prevent World War III (similarly to the earlier role of the Organization before the 1991 USSR dissolution). In contrast, the lack of defence funding prioritisation in Europe was a sign of weakness leading to Russian expansion in the post-Soviet neighbourhood (Loc 247–260).

In late March 2023, the Putin regime announced the deployment of new tactical nuclear weaponry in Belarus. Such a step could signal a scenario of a nuclearised solution to the Ukraine war (escalatory measure). Those preparations were a follow-up of earlier militarisation of Belarus, transformed into a permanent Russian military stronghold. After the short-lived rebellion in late June 2023, Wagner’s private military company, a part of critical clashes (seizure of Bakhmut), moved to Belarus to lead a hybrid war against NATO in the strategic Suwalki gap between Poland and Lithuania (Gera). While the conventional conflict could be prolonged into a years-long contest, the stakes of further escalatory steps are measured

by international appeal and practical utility alike. Devastated by shelling and missile strikes against soft targets, Ukraine would not be able either to provide counteroffensive capacity near the front lines or to pay for its reconstruction, owing the budgetary means to prolong resistance to Western donors.

The paper examines the historical founding of the escalation ladder in deterrence studies to find matchings with contemporary evaluations of setbacks and advantages in Western powers' engagement in Ukraine. Suppose the role of NATO and the U.S. could be explained as a gamble in the Ukrainian contest. In that case, the outcome depends on Russia's willingness to accept those rivals in the Kyiv power vacuum. Putin's gamble depends on Western public opinion and its susceptibility to strategic blackmail, as well as further reluctance to engage financially and militarily against Russia in the war-torn former Soviet republic (Europe's most prominent and vital as a potential buffer against Russian aggression). The stakes were evident by the end of 2022 when Ukraine's counteroffensive opened a path to the reconquest of the lost provinces.

Nonetheless, Putin's determination to go on with efforts to regain strategic initiative in the war changed the balance of conventional assets with a partly successful Bakhmut offence. Like the previous year's radical shifts on the battlefield, this one could confirm the value of allies. Without operational new heavy equipment from the West, most notably Leopard 2 tanks and MiG-29 jets, Ukraine could not offer staunch resistance and its military initiative (despite earlier deliveries of game-changing weaponry, mortars, HIMARS, drones, and MANPADS).

Deterrence studies may offer an inquisitive eye on the impact of deployments of particular strategic arms. However, the overall strategic balance following the analysed conflict may depend on a broader set of variables. Even if the total value of Western military assistance to Ukraine has grown to dozens of billions from U.S. and EU allies, the rating of such aid is not complete without a clear portfolio of actual arms transfers. The delay in jet delivery and limits regarding multirole fighter procurement were broadly accepted as a means of de-escalation in the context of Russia's criticism of Western support for Ukraine. So, were the limitations of arms sales to Ukraine explained just before the Russian invasion? None of the latter helped to de-escalate the conflict.

Nuclear escalation in deterrence studies

Selected views

Herman Kahn claimed that escalation (explained in the metaphor of a ladder and its rungs presenting the growth or decline of used forms of conflict engagement) could be analysed in international relations as a tool of bargaining, an effort to produce a more favourable outcome of the conflict in the form of concessions,

rather than the necessity of turning the dispute into an open war (12). Kahn stressed that the logic of escalation favours a stable set of rules accepted by both parts of the bipolar age rather than occasional benefits. In contrast, the balance of terror set the risk-taking limits (12–13). Would such a perspective based on the evidence of the Cuban missile crisis and mutual deterrence of former Cold War adversaries still be helpful to explain the controversial gamble of Putin, threatening the West both with his strategic missiles and tactical nuclear weapons to deter rivals from taking an active role in the Ukraine war?

Lawrence Freedman explained the problematic value of deterrence in international relations in terms of limited datasets used to validate expected benefits or behavioural patterns, norms imposed duly to suppress discord confronting international society. While the historical grounds of deterrence are most often linked to Jeremy Bentham's utilitarianism, Freedman stressed the importance of earlier legal scholar Cesare Beccaria's study on capital punishment in developing deterrence logic (61–69).

Thomas Schelling added to criminal applications of deterrence also unobvious cases of using such an approach in childcare or between friends or allies on an international level in the European integration context, seeing marginalisation as a valid threat imposed on allied countries refusing to sign particular new treaties (10–11). Clearly, the discussion on the practical valour of nuclear weapons solely, as well as weapons of mass destruction after the Cold War, had to discern between the respectable powers applying those in the doctrinal schemes and the newly fashioned regional developing powers, the challenges or risks causing multiple threats from U.S. perspective.

Bernard Brodie, an often-quoted scholar of deterrence' early years, a forerunner in a new discipline of theoretical focus on nuclear weapons employment, explained a late 1950s debate in the field as a shift from massive retaliation (gradually reduced in the declared hierarchy of alternatives since earlier J. F. Dulles' brinkmanship) towards the acceptance of limited war as an outcome of thermonuclear stability (261–263, 305). Brodie concluded that deployments of the thermonuclear arsenal of both superpowers in the 1950s made the prospect of all-out war encompassing strategic blows against urban areas a clear fiasco or highly unlikely scenario, i.e. "suicidal absurdity" (305).

Further reform of strategic doctrine led by Maxwell Taylor elaborated on the notion of strategic stalemate caused by thermonuclear deployments, leading to flexible response (allowing tactical nuclear weapons in limited war scenarios). The drama of deterrence reliability was centred on fallacies standing behind soft targets' choice of potential strategic strikes ("countervalue"). Maxwell Taylor's proposal was a radical step in terms of giving up the benefits of massive retaliation-based deterrence (undermined by Soviet advances, thermonuclear and ballistic, a.o. Sputnik satellite) in order to provide more means to wage limited wars with

or without nuclear weapons, seeing in that context a necessity of modernisation of conventional forces and further overseas deployments of troops (63–65, 158–159). Nuclear plenty and equilibrium of the late 1960s and early 1970s relied on assured retaliation and possible “counterforce” options (aimed against critical military assets) instead of earlier “countervalue” focus regarding urban areas (Sloan 57).

New targeting following the strategic balance of the early 1970s was formalised within Schlesinger doctrine, which sustained that the counter value option became redundant, and the clear rationale stood behind the shift in strategic strike logic. As Terry Tariff pointed out, the secretary of defence under Nixon’s selective approach to nuclear targeting was about avoiding mutual destruction of cities by more careful choice of enemy’s assets, including military centres and locations of potential counterforce or retaliation capacity (1–2). The further evolution of such an approach, sustained under the Carter administration by a new effort to protect the U.S. retaliation capacity using an underground system of tunnels (after the Safeguard concept of ICBM protection through missile defence was abandoned), led to targeting focused on the enemy’s command and control centres.

Explaining the focus on missile defence under Ronald Reagan, S. Sarkesian, J.A. Williams, and S. Cimbala underlined the validity and endurance of mutual vulnerability doctrine, despite essential efforts to replace it (aside from futuristic assured survival of Reagan’s Strategic Defence Initiative, SDI) through escalation dominance, minimum deterrence, or assured retaliation doctrines (77). Escalation dominance describes a military imbalance between parts of the conflict, in which the dominating side could freely extend the range of used means. In contrast, the other part was incapable of such an equivocal enhancement, so the weaponry would not be of balanced value (Morgan et al. 15). Clearly, the Strategic Defense Initiative could not participate in the U.S.-Soviet struggle it was meant to prepare. Countermeasures against massive Intercontinental Ballistic Missile (ICBM) attacks on the Earth’s orbit were never built. G.W. Bush’s administration made steps to provide ground-based midcourse defence against limited strategic strikes through a proposed third site in Poland (apart from Alaska and California). However, the Obama administration gave up on that plan to replace it with Aegis Ashore, which was short of an intercontinental reach. The Romanian Aegis base was completed by 2016, but the Polish one remained under construction by 2022 (Judson). Missile defence capacities appeared critically important when the Russian attempt to seize the entire Ukraine through an unprovoked armed invasion in 2022 marked the New Cold War’s dangerous hot phase.

So far, the mutual vulnerability (or mutually assured destruction, MAD) paradigm has not been dismantled despite ongoing efforts to enhance ballistic missile interception, confirmed by the December 2001 abandonment of the 1972 Anti-Ballistic Missile (ABM) treaty by the G.W. Bush administration. The role of nuclear weapons as a critical component of the deterrence apparatus in military

policy after the Cold War was not balanced by comparable progress of missile defence as combat-proven equipment (Steff 178). Proponents of the latter sustained that it could offset the burden of nuclear retaliation or first-strike options, among many critically valid challenges of international security, including such misfortunes as accidental launches.

If John Mearsheimer was right in the 1990s, the course of events could no longer favour independent Ukraine without the nuclear hedge. The West-leaning of Ukraine in the 21st century was based on liberal democracy promotion, harshly criticised by this neorealist scholar as a risky adventurism in Russia's backyard (Mearsheimer, "Why the Ukraine Crisis Is the West's Fault" 77–78). Budapest Memorandum of 1994 was often referred to as proof of Russian unwillingness to respect its commitments, i.e. the integrity of Ukraine's borders, confirmed in return for the transfer of Soviet nuclear weapons from Ukraine to Russia ("Memorandum on security assurances"). In 1993, J. Mearsheimer assessed that without nuclear weapons, Ukraine could not defend itself from Russia, while the West (U.S.) would not be ready to provide security assurances counterweighing the Russian advantage and lifting pressure leading to war ("The Case for a Ukrainian Nuclear Deterrent" 50–51). The following passage underlines the strategic importance of Budapest memorandum, an obligation broken by Russian illegal annexation of Crimea and further illegal acts against Ukraine's territorial integrity: "The Russian Federation, the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, and the United States of America reaffirm their commitment to Ukraine, in accordance with the principles of the CSCE Final Act, to respect the independence and the existing borders of Ukraine" ("Memorandum on security assurances" 169).

Neoconservative approach to security policy, dominating under the early Walker Bush administration, could not find a balance between the defence of critically essential goals of the U.S. as a superpower and the practical approach to daily hazards internationally, and the 9/11 plot surely did not help this camp to find such a needed harmony. Nonetheless, its weight in U.S. foreign security policy was not matched by any other fraction, as the heavy load of interventionism, most of it centred in Iraq and Afghanistan, led to a gradual decline of U.S. deterrence capacity globally. It is difficult not to see any linkage between the disgraceful collapse of the U.S.-supported regime in Afghanistan, a democratic one, and the speedy pressure to sort out the matter of another protégé within the circle of former Soviet empire ambition or its key component, Ukraine. For sure, the demise of the Iraq intervention (waged under the banner of democracy promotion) helped Russia and China to justify their autocratic regimes and gain support for interventions of their own ("Tony Blair").

Escalation ladder or escalation dominance: Russia's nuclear advantage in Ukraine

Clearly, when tactical nuclear weapon deployment outside Russia was announced, a sense of international urgency still overshadowed the war utility of such pressure, discussed in the context of the deterrence game between the Kremlin and NATO (Ljunggren). The controversial step was reversing the 1990s agreement on denuclearisation of other former Soviet republics than Russia, seen as a concession on the side of Ukraine that posed a risk to its independence (Gregory).

Preparing for the worst, the Ukrainian army and national leadership expected the best: Western military support to outweigh the grip of Russian conventional and nuclear advantage. Unfortunately, despite many efforts to change the approach of Western countries to the Ukraine war, any form of direct military engagement against illegal Russian aggression was labelled “escalatory” or leading to a general war between Russia and NATO with its worst possible consequences, i.e. nuclear annihilation. Finally, as some could expect, the prolonged conflict brought down another milestone in the arms control system, New START, suspended by Putin in February 2023 (“Vladimir Putin”). The 2010 treaty, prolonged until 2026, was the critical component of nuclear control, particularly important after earlier U.S. and NATO withdrawal from the INF treaty (intermediate missile ban) due to Russian breaches (Faulconbridge).

In March 2023, apart from the controversial decision to deploy tactical nuclear weapons in Belarus, Putin chose to suspend the exchange of information with the U.S. about missile tests after new mobile launchers were deployed in Siberia to scare Western countries off from engagement in Ukraine, as well as to prove that the land-based branch of nuclear triad of Russia was still unmatched by comparable capacity on the U.S. part (Isachenkov).

Conventional escalation of the Ukraine war was visible in Russian efforts to mobilise vast amounts of conscripts, an additional 200 thousand, by the end of 2022. When the fights in Bakhmut, a strategic industrial location of the Donbas front, were consuming an excessive number of troops, a private military company supporting Putin's regime, Wagner Group, owned by billionaire and close Putin ally Yevgeni Prigozhin, provided necessary contingents to continue the Winter 2022/2023 campaign until March 2023. The lack of adequate workforce to wage further offensive and prepare for an expected Ukrainian counterassault led to a further Russian drone campaign, threatening Kyiv. In late March, reports from the British defence ministry confirmed Russian preparations to recruit an additional volunteer army, if true, even 400 thousand strong (Zakir-Hussain and Rai).

The escalatory nature of Russia's 2022–2023 Ukraine war was precise from Putin's earliest steps. Declaring that the goal of the campaign lies in Donbas and calling it an anti-terrorist mission in this strategic industrial region, Putin opened an invasion leading to a conquest of an entire Ukraine, attacked from the northern, eastern and southern fronts (occupied Crimea) in attempts to capture central and east Ukraine, as well as to cut it off from the Azov Sea or even landlock fully. Russian forces seized Zaporozhe (the most extensive in Europe nuclear power plant Enerhodar), Kherson and merged occupation with the Azov coastline offensive. The most dangerous chapters of the war came in its early weeks, when from February 24 until April, Russian armoured columns invading from allied Belarus attempted to seize Kyiv to restore the rule of Russian-backed former president Viktor Yanukovich.

By Mid-2022, the U.S. delivered eight sets of High Mobility Artillery Rocket Systems (HIMARS), scheduled another 4, and provided necessary guidance of its operational use to secure grounds for further Ukrainian counteroffensive, the one that brought the largest military progress, the capture of Kherson. November 11, 2022, a victory made the Ukrainian command reliable enough to sustain President Zelensky's vision of the liberation of Crimea (Maynes and Westerman). The earlier September 2022 counteroffensive on the eastern front allowed Ukraine to recapture a larger portion of the Kharkiv region with an essential Iziurm centre to move closer to re-entering Luhansk province (Harding).

In March 2023, the first Western heavy-armoured vehicles were delivered to Ukraine. German-made Leopard-2 tanks could provide for a limited capacity to wage another counteroffensive on one of the critically important sections of the long front, stretching from the Black Sea coastline westwards of Crimea, a reconquered Kherson area, through Zaporozhe, north Azov Sea coast regions occupied by Russia, Doneck and Luhansk regions, and verges of Kharkiv region. The U.S., after lengthy disputes, decided to provide Ukraine with both Abrams tanks and desperately needed Patriot missile defence earlier than planned (the decision on the latter was announced in December 2022), but late seeing the terrible cost of Russian bombardments (Bertrand and Britzky). On April 19, 2023, the Patriots were officially delivered to Ukraine (Pemble).

The strategic value of Western military aid was limited due to the 2022 decision to give up on sending air support to Ukraine, apart from UAVs (U.S. Switchblade, Turkish Bayraktar helping to defeat armoured columns attacking Kyiv from the north). Luckily, the expected breakthrough was possible by early 2023 due to a determination of smaller NATO allies. Slovakia was the first country to deliver much-needed MiG-29 jets to Ukraine; next came Poland. On March 23, 2023, the Slovakian air force transferred the first 4 out of 13 granted MiG-29 fighters to Ukrainian air forces ("Slovakia delivers"). World media reported the March 16 announcement of Polish president Andrzej Duda, who declared that a transfer of

Polish MiG-29 jets in the number of 4 was underway, to be followed by further deliveries, possibly 13 jets (Mansoor).

If those deliveries had been made readily and the Ukrainian air force regained even partial operational capacity, there would have been a chance to seize the operational initiative for Ukraine by May 2023, which could have, under General Ben Hodges' optimistic scenario, even provided for Ukrainian victory by the end of the year (Stanton). Expected as breakthrough F-16 delivery was long rejected by the U.S. to de-escalate until the May 2023 G-7 summit declaration in Japan on the U.S. decision to deliver those multirole fighters (Bertrand). Without air advantage, the June–August 2023 Ukraine offensive against heavily entrenched Russian forces in Ukraine's occupied south and east-south regions between Zaporozhe and Azov was largely ineffective, liberating only 200 square km of territory ("Why Ukraine").

Escalation ladder logic seemed so far to determine Russia's advantage. Having the largest domestic civilian nuclear hedge of Ukraine under its military control or within the range of missiles and drones, the Russian war machine was capable of turning the conventional conflict into a humanitarian disaster. That was a challenge that Western powers could not offset or soften by military assistance. It was possible before the invasion and before Russian troops captured Enerhodar on March 5, 2022 (Heching). The efforts to reverse the crisis caused by that seizure were heading towards an international mission or control zone under the International Atomic Energy Agency's custody without significant progress due to a lack of support in the Kremlin for such a compromise (Nelson and Norteman). Fortunately, by April 2022, Ukrainian forces recaptured the Chornobyl area, seized by Russia early in the war causing the hazard of renewed radiation threat, the site of the most significant nuclear plant disaster in history in 1986 (Sparkes). Possible escalatory-related hazards to Enerhodar and nuclear energy safety were discussed in the context of the June 2023 unsolved explosion of the Kakhovka dam on the Dnepr river, which prevented the Ukrainian offensive from the Kerson eastwards (Falk).

Russia's measures to target or capture the Ukrainian power plant system could mark an escalatory outcome, extending the limits of conventional war. If those are exceeded, a nuclear blackmail could be imposed upon both the Ukrainian society and the international community. The latter found no means to exert any discipline on Russia, a permanent member of the U.N. Security Council enjoying the privilege of vetoing any of the Council's decisions. Putin's regime found no incentive from the Western powers or other leading actors, such as China, to withstand the pressure of war goals within the limits of armed forces operations against military targets only. The genocidal-scale atrocities were highlighted by a massive flight of civilians, reaching millions of refugees in the EU neighbourhood, as well as the humanitarian crisis in multiple Ukrainian cities caused by a lack of water

and heat energy in Winter months due to Russian shelling. Notably, on March 17, 2023, the International Criminal Court issued an arrest warrant against Russian President Vladimir Putin for the crime of illegal deportation of children from occupied provinces of Ukraine to Russia (“Situation in Ukraine”).

Conclusion

The research area depicted in this paper encompasses the applicability of the bipolar age escalation ladder analysis to the present-day conventional war in Ukraine. The Cold War experience still seems valid due to the balance of former superpowers’ nuclear forces and the 1980s’ comparable set of strategic deterrence assets. Nonetheless, the geopolitical environment has become a distant derivative of the pre-1989 ordeal. Yalta’s order was revamped in favour of the Western integration enlargements, including former Soviet satellite countries of the Warsaw Pact. NATO’s eastern flank reached through Baltic states Narva and through Poland, Romania, Belarus and Moldova, respectively. In regard to deterrence postures, Obama’s European deployments (including Poland) gradually made the second-grade member states of NATO valid. Probably, on the part of the Kremlin’s empire-building rationale, a geopolitical imbalance postulated in the context of Western communities’ enlargements made escalatory steps in Ukraine seem a response to NATO (or allegedly “Nazi” military pressure). By August 2023, a nuclear escalation of the large-scale conventional war still appeared highly unlikely despite various threats coming from the Kremlin undermining the stability of measures excluding weapons of mass destruction. Further broader analysis of the discussed problems could probably benefit from a comparative re-examination of earlier mentioned Cold War crises involving potential nuclear employment.

In the deeper focus on the Ukraine case of 2022–2023, the uncharted waters (by August 2023) included the fate of a large southern offensive of the NATO-armoured Ukrainian forces, mostly ineffective since early June by early August (with the two-day Wagner “coup” interlude). Western assistance for Ukraine could be seen both as a response to Russian escalatory measures (START withdrawal and tactical nuclear deployments in Belarus) through engagement and as a form of extended deterrence.

Ukraine war waged by the Putin regime reached the scale of a genocidal conflict, and at the same time, it brought a threat of a nuclear disaster, almost forgotten since the Cold War era. The civilian losses and costs of destroyed infrastructure exceeded any substantial benefit Russia could take from the occupied provinces, considering the prolonged nature of such a war. Even frozen conflicts are extremely costly, both for the societies and the budgets, but the one between Russia and Ukraine could bring more damage than the international community may control. Escalatory

steps by Russia leading to the employment of parts of its nuclear arsenal to gain an advantage in the New Cold War game of chances regarding Ukraine's borders and integrity may spark a next European clash at large.

The events in 2022–2023 were a clear example of a lost partnership between the parties to the New START, represented by Vladimir Putin and U.S. President Joe Biden. The latter opted for more than a moderate deterrence game over Ukraine and any form of U.S. military engagement in that country. Nonetheless, U.S. support for Ukraine, amounting to dozens of billions by 2023, proved decisive in building a match for Russia's regional preponderance. Would it suffice to stop and reverse the tide of war, minding Russia's nuclear hedges? Notably, the EU countries, the second largest donor of aid for Ukraine, could become a game-changer, as multiple arms deliveries could prove, most notably heavy tanks and jet fighters, munitions and light military equipment, artillery units or air defence equipment.

Poland, as Ukraine's closest backer, has a fundamental and difficult challenge to take, giving new homes for millions of Ukrainians and a strategic lift in terms of the unprecedented range of Russia's invasion. Finally, Polish support proved its decisive political scope earlier during the Orange Revolution and Maidan protests. Politically, Poland is no match for Russia, but its voice in NATO and EU remains valid. Could Ukraine count on NATO membership or EU candidate faster track after Finland and Sweden's accession? Though unlikely to become fulfilled, the premise of NATO membership was a factor of Ukraine-Russia relations of double value, both a response to the growing hostility of Putin's Russia towards V. Zelensky's Kyiv and its rationale. Harsh objections of the Kremlin to EU and NATO membership undermined Ukrainian sovereignty despite earlier international obligations, such as the Budapest Memorandum of 1994.

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