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OPINION | COMMENTARY

# *The U.S. Should Show It Can Win a Nuclear War*

Washington might study Cold War-era practices that had a major effect on Soviet policy making.

By Seth Cropsey

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A Sarmat intercontinental ballistic missile test in northwest Russia, April 20.

PHOTO: RUSSIAN DEFENCE MINISTRY PRESS S/SHUTTERSTOCK

Russia conducted its first test of the Sarmat, an intercontinental ballistic missile that carries a heavy nuclear payload, on April 20. Vladimir Putin and his advisers have issued nuclear warnings throughout the war in Ukraine, threatening the U.S. and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization with attack if they escalate their involvement. Moscow recently threatened Sweden and Finland with a pre-emptive strike if they join NATO.

The reality is that unless the U.S. prepares to win a nuclear war, it risks losing one. Robert C. O'Brien, a former White House national security adviser, proposed a series of conventional responses, which are necessary but not sufficient to deter Russian nuclear escalation. Developing a coherent American strategy requires

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understanding why Russia threatens to use nuclear weapons and how the U.S. can recalibrate its strategic logic for a nuclear environment.

Russia's war is being fought on two levels. At the military level, the battlefields have been restricted to Ukrainian and, in a handful of instances, Russian territory. But the conflict is also a war against NATO, given Ukraine's position as an applicant, NATO's military support for Ukraine, and NATO's

willingness to embargo Russian products and cut off Russian energy.

Mr. Putin had two objectives in going to war. First, he hoped to destroy Ukraine as an independent state. Russia planned to drive into Kyiv within hours, install a quisling government, and months later stage referendums throughout the country that would give the Kremlin direct control of its east and south.

Aleksandr Lukashenko's Belarus, and perhaps the Central Asian despots, would fall in line. Mr. Putin would therefore reconstitute an empire stretching to the Polish border.

Ukrainians thwarted that plan. Much depends on the next few weeks, as Russia stages a major offensive in the east designed to destroy the Ukrainian military's immediate combat capacity, tear off eastern provinces, and solidify a land corridor to Crimea. But there is a serious possibility that Ukraine wins this next round of fighting. Russia has no reserves beyond its mobilized forces; its units have dwindling morale; and those formations withdrawn from around Kyiv are trained to conduct armored, mechanized, and infantry operations and poorly suited for combat. Meantime, the Ukrainians are receiving heavier weapons from the West and have begun a counteroffensive around Kharkiv, which, if successful, will spoil Russia's attack.

If Russia's military situation appears dire, Mr. Putin has a dual incentive to use nuclear weapons. This is consistent with publicly stated Russian military doctrine. A nuclear attack would present Ukraine with the same choice Japan

faced in 1945: surrender or be annihilated. Ukraine may not break. The haunting images from Bucha, Irpin and elsewhere demonstrate Russia's true intentions. A Russian victory would lead to mass killings, deportation, rape and other atrocities. The Ukrainian choice won't be between death and survival, but rather armed resistance and unarmed extermination.

Nuclear use would require NATO to respond. But a nuclear response could trigger retaliation, dragging Russia and NATO up the escalation ladder to a wider nuclear confrontation.

Perhaps a conventional response to a Russian nuclear attack would be sufficient. What if the U.S. and its allies destroyed Russian military units deployed to the Black Sea, Syria and Libya; cut all oil pipelines to Russia, and used their economic clout to threaten China, and other states conducting business with Russia, with an embargo?

Each of these steps is necessary. But Russia's goal in going nuclear is to knock NATO out of the war. The Kremlin believes its resolve outstrips that of the U.S. A conventional American response would confirm this—and create incentives for additional Russian nuclear use.

The Kremlin is resurrecting the arcane art of nuclear war fighting. These weapons have a military purpose. They also have a political one. The U.S. should reframe its thinking in kind.

This isn't to say the U.S. should use nuclear weapons—again, a nuclear response would make global nuclear war more likely. But America and its allies can take steps against Russia's nuclear arsenal that undermine the Russian position at higher escalation levels. The U.S. Navy's surface ships, for example, could be re-equipped with nuclear weapons, as they were during the Cold War.

Most critically, if Russia used a nuclear weapon, the U.S. could use its naval power to hunt down and destroy a Russian nuclear-powered ballistic-missile submarine, the backbone of Russian second-strike capability. Late in the Cold War the U.S. Navy threatened to do exactly that, pressuring the Soviet Union's nuclear bastions, the protected littoral areas from which Soviet subs aimed to operate with safety. In a series of naval exercises during the Reagan administration, the

U.S. and its allies simulated assaulting the Sea of Okhotsk and Barents Sea bastions, while U.S. submarines probed and shadowed Soviet boats in both areas. Post-Cold War evidence reveals that American naval pressure had a major impact on Soviet policy making: Despite Moscow's priority of armaments over all other state needs, the U.S. showed it would still be able to fight and win a nuclear war.

The ability to win is the key. By arming surface ships with tactical nuclear weapons as well as attacking a nuclear-missile sub and thus reducing Russian second-strike ability, the U.S. undermines Russia's ability to fight a nuclear war. The Soviets were deeply afraid of a pre-emptive strike by NATO. That fear has morphed, under Mr. Putin's regime, into a fixation on the "color revolutions," pro-democracy uprisings in former Soviet republics. Jeopardizing Russian second-strike capability would tangibly raise the military stakes. Mr. Putin could no longer unleash his nuclear arsenal with impunity. Instead, he would need to reckon with the possibility that NATO could decapitate the Kremlin—yes, suffering casualties in the process, but still decapitate it.

A nuclear war should never be fought. But the Kremlin seems willing to fight one, at least a limited one. If the U.S. demonstrates it is unwilling to do so, the chance that the Kremlin will use nuclear weapons becomes dangerously real.

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