

Opinion **Russian politics**

Russia is trying to put a price tag on Nato's involvement in Ukraine

Vladimir Putin is seeking reckless new ways to impose costs on the US and its allies

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Ukrainian soldiers use a high mobility artillery rocket system to target a Russian position © Serhii Mykhalchuk/Global Images Ukraine via Getty Images

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When Nato leaders meet in Washington on July 9, the pivotal topic will be support for Ukraine and strengthening military deterrence against Russia. With the situation on the battlefield gradually turning in Moscow's favour, the focus will be on Kyiv's most immediate requirements, along with the need for Europe to increase its defence spending. Yet Nato also needs to discuss and act upon the dangerous new ways Vladimir Putin is finding to impose costs on the US and its allies — with the potential for ruinous spillover effects beyond anybody's control.

In year three of its war against Ukraine, perceived by the Kremlin as just one thread in its broader confrontation with the west, inflicting pain on Kyiv's supporters is increasingly a priority for Putin. The Kremlin wants to put a price tag on Nato's growing involvement in the war on Ukraine's behalf — as both deterrence and revenge. The latest White House decision to [allow](#) Kyiv to use western long-range

weapons for strikes inside Russia itself, beyond occupied Ukrainian territory, as well as recent Ukrainian drone strikes on radars that are part of Russia's nuclear attack [early warning system](#), are prompting Putin to act more boldly than ever.

Since the start of the war, the west's primary concern has been the possible use of nuclear weapons. Unsurprisingly, the Kremlin is again beating the [tired drum](#) of nuclear escalation. Moscow has started drills involving tactical nukes, and Putin is publicly [talking](#) about making Russia's nuclear doctrine more offensive. Still, the risk of actual use is lower than it was in autumn 2022 after Ukraine made battlefield gains. With the outlook now more favourable for Russia, it's unlikely that Putin will reach for the most potent instrument at his disposal — one better kept as the ultimate insurance against defeat.

But [Putin](#) is not short of other tools. Right now, Moscow's primary instrument for escalation is the use of missiles and drones against Ukraine's energy infrastructure. An air strike campaign scaled up in spring has already destroyed [more than half](#) of Ukraine's generation capacity. Repairs to some power stations will take years. With the onset of winter, large population centres will face the prospect of freezing and blackouts. Putin aims not only to pull the plug on military manufacturing plants in [Ukraine](#), but to drive millions of new refugees westward, putting pressure on Europe and helping politicians who want an end to western involvement in the war.

Then there is Russia's [campaign](#) of sabotage in Europe. Russian intelligence is busy targeting industrial and logistical assets that are critical for producing and transporting weapons to Ukraine. At the same time, the Kremlin is using western organised crime networks to [kill traitors](#) and harass Russian dissidents. This comes on top of many years of Russian efforts to exploit divisions in western societies. Now, as the Kremlin observes the youth anger in the west caused by the Gaza war, it sees a target-rich environment.

Finally, Russia is ready to share its sensitive military technologies with the west's adversaries. On top of prior weapons design transfers to [China](#) and Iran, Putin has recently [cemented](#) a defence pact with North Korea, and may help Pyongyang to boost its nuclear and space programme. Earlier Putin mused about a potential transfer of weapons to any forces that oppose America — such as the Houthis in the Red Sea. The Kremlin's approach is deliberately reckless, and Putin describes it as tit-for-tat in response to western arms provisions to Kyiv. The problem is that these actions may create situations beyond the Kremlin's control.

Nato's response must go beyond efforts to deliver more air defence to Ukraine, which

will be constrained by output bottlenecks and the alliance's own needs. Plans should be laid to help Ukraine through the winter and prepare for a possible wave of refugees. In addition to [re-establishing](#) military deterrence, the west should beef up its capabilities in counter-intelligence, counterterrorism and combating organised crime. It is the nexus of these three worlds that Russia is tempted to weaponise.

Finally, Nato should take back control of escalation management in this war. It's worth having an honest discussion about the limits of Nato's direct involvement, and agreeing some guidelines on how to talk about them in public. As many sensitive moves as possible should be made away from the public eye to avoid feeding Putin's zeal for retaliation. Channels for discussing risk reduction with Moscow should remain open.

The conflict between Russia and the west is becoming even more dangerous and unpredictable. The path to meaningful diplomacy is still closed. Responsible risk management is as necessary as ever.

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