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Putin Wields the Nuclear Threat — and Plays with Fire

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During the Cold War, the United States and the Soviet Union established a nuclear relationship commonly called Mutual Assured Destruction, known by the pejorative acronym MAD. The basic notion was that Washington and Moscow each possessed sufficient nuclear capability to destroy the other's society, however a war might start. This mutual vulnerability was expected to ensure that each would be deterred from severely provoking the other. This condition of mutual deterrence, enforced by mutual nuclear vulnerability, was thought to create a "stable balance of terror" that would help prevent large-scale war. That hope was expressed by Sir Winston Churchill when he suggested that "safety will be the sturdy child of terror, and survival the twin brother of annihilation."

Although the United States never actually adopted MAD as a formal policy, most of the public debate and discussion of nuclear weapons in the United States revolved around the MAD notion of a balance of terror. The father of the atomic bomb, Robert Oppenheimer, for example, described the U.S.–Soviet relationship as akin to "two scorpions in a bottle, each capable of killing the other, but only at the risk of his own life." While grisly-sounding, MAD and a "stable" balance of terror suggested fundamentally defensive U.S. and Soviet positions, with each side presumably compelled to stay in its lane lest it risk unleashing a nuclear holocaust.

With the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, MAD and the balance of terror were relegated to the role of historical footnotes, or so it seemed. Absent the Cold War, most commentators, including senior U.S. military officers, decreed that nuclear weapons, MAD, and nuclear deterrence were increasingly irrelevant. Great-power relations supposedly had become more amicable and law-abiding: Nuclear strategy was old-think; nuclear crises were history; and nuclear war was now inconceivable. As the retired commander of the U.S. Strategic Command, General James Cartwright, argued in a 2012 study promoting "nuclear zero":

MAD no longer occupies a central psychological or political space in the U.S.–Russian relationship. . . . The risk of nuclear confrontation between the United States and either Russia or China belongs to the past, not the future.

This cheery view became accepted wisdom in Washington, and the Obama administration identified the pursuit of nuclear disarmament ("nuclear zero") as a high-priority goal. As is often the case, however, the reality of international relations has proven far harsher than accepted wisdom would admit. The stark fact in this third post–Cold War decade is that Russia's approach to grand strategy and nuclear weapons is more aggressive and indeed more dangerous than ever was envisaged by those who set forth the notions of MAD and a stable balance of terror. Russia's posture is not the essentially defensive position implicit in notions of MAD and mutual nuclear deterrence.

Instead, Russian president Vladimir Putin has taken a page from Nazi Germany's playbook of the 1930s and early 1940s. He claims responsibility for ethnic Russian minorities in neighboring countries. We saw this gambit in Russia's war against Georgia in 2008, in the military occupation of Crimea in 2014,

and in its ongoing military operations in Eastern Ukraine. “Ethnic cleansing” and “Russification” of key areas have followed some of these military operations. But Putin has what Hitler lacked: nuclear weapons. With these, he attempts to pressure neighboring states to timidly accept Moscow’s desires, including the redrawing of European borders and “Russification.” Russia now wields nuclear weapons and threats not only to protect its territory but also to intimidate and coerce its neighbors into submission. Moscow’s crude nuclear threats to its neighbors, including American allies, vividly demonstrate its aggressive nuclear strategy. Those threats are intended to stoke such fear in the U.S. and its allies that all will hesitate to respond strongly to Russian military aggression. For Putin, the fruits of this grand strategy include approval ratings within Russia that are the envy of the world: 89 percent.

In short, Russia’s strategy is now one of nuclear coercion, not stable mutual deterrence. How far Putin will push this strategy remains an open question, but recent history does not suggest a comforting answer. As Secretary of Defense Ash Carter observed in a speech to American allies this month: “Moscow’s nuclear sabre-rattling raises questions about Russia’s commitment to strategic stability and causes us . . . to wonder whether . . . they share the profound caution . . . that world leaders in the nuclear age have shown over decades to the brandishing of nuclear weapons.” Precisely so, which is why Russia’s nuclear policies are now so dangerous.

Claims that Russia, or any rational country, could use nuclear weapons and strategy in this manner — that they are not merely Cold War relics — continue to be dismissed in most Western quarters as the musings of Cold Warriors. The dangerous reality, however, has been obvious for several years. As the U.S. National Intelligence Council observed in 2012:

Nuclear ambitions in the U.S. and Russia over the last 20 years have evolved in opposite directions. Reducing the role of nuclear weapons in U.S. security strategy is a U.S. objective, while Russia is pursuing new concepts and capabilities for expanding the role of nuclear weapons in its security strategy.

The evidence since 2012 is that Putin’s nuclear moves are becoming even more dangerous, including a reported doctrinal innovation that ironically envisions Russia’s first use of nuclear weapons as a form of nuclear “de-escalation” — that is, if Russia uses nuclear weapons in a local conflict, opponents will cease resistance, thus de-escalating the crisis. Deputy Defense Secretary Robert Work rightfully stated this month in open testimony before Congress that with this doctrinal innovation, Russia “is literally playing with fire.” These are not Cold War musings; they are a description of contemporary reality. What to do about Russia’s imperialistic and coercive nuclear strategy? The first step is for Washington to awaken from its post–Cold War nuclear stupor and recognize that the world does not conform to the cheery visions put forth by those who continue to oppose U.S. nuclear programs and press for deeper and deeper reductions in America’s nuclear stockpile. In recent congressional testimony, Admiral James Winnefeld, vice chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, rightly described the situation regarding U.S. nuclear forces: “The choice right now is modernizing or losing deterrent capability. . . . That’s the stark choice we’re faced with.” There no longer is any reasonable argument about the prudent choice.

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