

Keep Calm and Carry On

America and its allies shouldn't panic in the face of Putin's vague nuclear threats



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A Minuteman III intercontinental ballistic missile test, August 11, 2021.

Credit: Michael Peterson, U.S. Space Force.

In the wake of the Ukrainian military's [rout](#) of Russian forces in and around Kharkiv, Vladimir Putin announced a major escalation of his war against Ukraine. He ordered what he called a partial mobilization of Russia's military last week, a call-up that quickly came to look more like a full-scale effort to dragoon draft-eligible Russian men to fight in Ukraine – what one expert on the Russian military [characterized](#) as a “de facto general mobilization.” Putin also effectively gave notice that Russia would annex

swathes of Ukrainian territory, and once again issued vague threats to use nuclear weapons if he didn't get his way in Ukraine.

Putin's renewed nuclear threats understandably grabbed the most attention in the United States and Europe, where political pundits and policy analysts subsequently expressed their own [overwrought worries](#) about the potential for nuclear war. But Putin's recent threats are simply not credible, and they can only be taken seriously in the sense that the fundamental stupidity and futility of such courses of action doesn't mean they won't happen. It's entirely possible that Putin is so thoroughly unhinged that he'd throw a nuclear temper tantrum if he cannot achieve his goals in Ukraine – but that doesn't make his recent threats particularly or inherently credible.

To begin with, Putin's threats remain simultaneously trivial and vague: he [says](#) that Russia “will use all the instruments at its disposal to counter a threat against its territorial integrity” before going on to claim that he's not bluffing. Taken at face value, this statement doesn't do much beyond reiterate Moscow's basic deterrence policy. It doesn't really tell us much that we don't already know, up to and including the fact that Putin likes to rattle his nuclear saber with abandon. There's little reason for the United States or its allies to get worked up about a fundamentally trivial utterance.

But Putin's recent rhetoric has been taken to mean much more than a simple restatement of Russian nuclear doctrine, especially since it's entirely unclear whether or not the Kremlin aims to apply this policy to the Ukrainian territory it intends to annex. His insistence that he's not bluffing suggests he's aware that this broader threat lacks credibility, but in so doing he only manages to erode his credibility even further. More importantly, Putin's recent warnings haven't been accompanied by any concrete nuclear signaling whatsoever – not even the sort of [weak signals](#) he sent at the start of his invasion in February.

Nor is it clear what Putin would actually gain from the use of nuclear weapons, not least when it comes to his own goals and objectives in Ukraine. Nuclear weapons [wouldn't](#) give Russia's exhausted and demoralized troops any real edge on the battlefield. As the British strategist Lawrence Freedman has [noted](#), Russian atrocities have only hardened Ukrainian and, not incidentally, American and European [resolve](#). Indeed, it's easier to

imagine a Russian nuclear attack against some target in Ukraine provoking an American-led intervention than precipitating Kyiv's surrender.

Putin also accused the United States and its NATO allies of engaging in unspecified "nuclear blackmail." As Cathy Young [remarked](#) in *The Bulwark*, it's probably just projection – Putin accuses others of doing exactly what he himself is doing or plans to do. But from another perspective, this statement may well reflect Putin's own frustration with the fact that he cannot strike against Ukraine's backers without risking nuclear war himself. In other words, Putin knows that nuclear deterrence limits his own freedom of action just as much as it limits America's and NATO's options.

These nuclear threats also fit into the [age-old Kremlin strategy](#) of encouraging nuclear war scares among pundits and analysts in the West. By promiscuously raising even the faintest specter of nuclear war, Moscow hopes these voices will press the U.S. government and its NATO allies to curtail their support for Ukraine in order to avert a catastrophic and uncontrollable escalation spiral – never mind the fact that it's the Kremlin that's escalating in Ukraine, or that it's the Kremlin making overt nuclear threats. In any case, the Kremlin's nuclear ploys have become so routine that they've firmly entered boy-who-cried-wolf territory.

But the fundamental reason Putin's attempts at nuclear intimidation lack credibility are the stakes involved: it's hard to seriously believe that anyone in their right mind would blow up the world – and their own nation, and themselves – over the Donbas. As the French existentialist philosopher Albert Camus [reminds us](#), however, the stupidity and irrationality of war doesn't stop it from breaking out. If Putin is truly so mad as to launch a suicidal worldwide nuclear war over Ukrainian liberation of the Donbas, there's not much the United States can do to deter him beyond an unacceptable capitulation that would mortgage American and global security to the whims of an unstable tyrant.

Fortunately, Putin's behavior – as appalling and brutal as it's been in Ukraine – gives every indication that he understands and respects America's own redlines when it comes to escalation. In part, that's probably due to the fact that Russia's military couldn't actually cross them by, say, attacking a NATO member nation. But for all his pandemic-induced [isolation and paranoia](#), Putin seems to recognize that courting nuclear war via

direct military confrontation with the United States and its allies would not end well for Moscow or him personally.

For its part, the Biden administration has handled this subject fairly well so far. Some early public [hand-wringing about escalation](#) notwithstanding, Biden and his national security team have made clear to Putin and his circle that any Russian use of nuclear weapons would cross an American redline and have, as National Security Adviser Jake Sullivan recently [put it](#), “catastrophic consequences” for Moscow. At the same time, the administration has made clear that there will be no direct American or NATO military intervention in the war – even as the United States and its allies have backed Ukraine with [ever-increasing supplies](#) of weapons, ammunition, and other military equipment.

In the face of Putin’s renewed nuclear threats, then, the United States and its allies should keep calm and carry on with their steadfast support for Ukraine. That entails three main courses of action:

- 1. Reaffirm support for Ukraine’s war effort and the recovery of territory seized by Moscow starting in 2014.** In a recent [60 Minutes interview](#), President Biden said that victory in Ukraine meant “to get Russia out of Ukraine completely and recognizing [Ukraine’s] sovereignty.” He also pledged the United States would support Ukraine “As long as it takes.” These messages should be constantly reiterated by Biden’s foreign policy team, even if the United States would ultimately settle for a negotiated deal that sees Moscow pull back to pre-February lines of control.
- 2. Leave everything on the table when it comes to conventional military support to Ukraine.** Though the United States may not choose to [supply](#) Ukraine with certain weapons systems – the long-range [ATACMS missile](#) being case-in-point – it should not explicitly take these weapons off the table. That means refusing to rule out the provision of tanks and fighter jets as well, even if these systems won’t be handed over to Ukraine in the very near future. American diplomats should work to make sure that NATO allies like [Germany](#) also not preemptively preclude the delivery of certain weapons systems to Ukraine.
- 3. Keep clearly communicating American and NATO redlines to Moscow – whether in private or in public.** While Putin has issued his nuclear threats publicly, the

United States has chosen to keep its communications with Moscow private and confidential. These lines of communication should be kept open and used frequently; Putin should know that we will not respect his redlines if he does not respect ours. But there may come a time when the United States may need to amplify its private warnings against certain Russian steps like the use of nuclear weapons with public admonitions.

Putin's empty threat to throw a nuclear temper tantrum notwithstanding, deterrence continues to hold between the United States and Russia. There's no reason for the United States and its NATO allies to panic – and every reason for them to keep backing Ukraine to the hilt.

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