

UKRAINE CRISIS UNDER A NUCLEAR OVERHANG

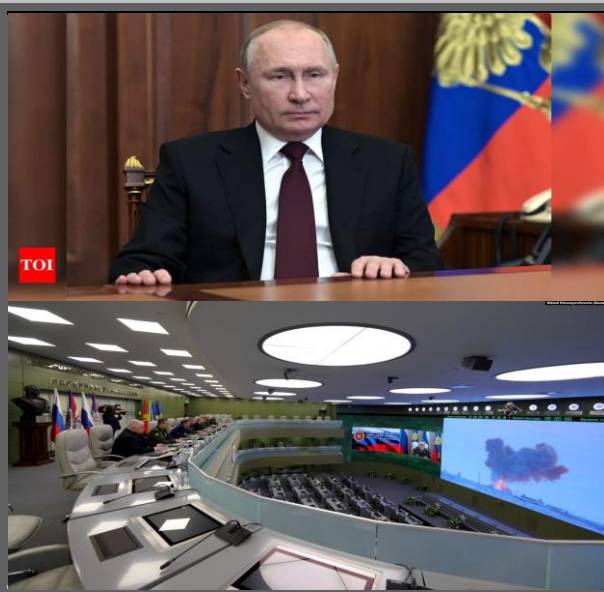
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(Views expressed in the brief are those of the author, and do not represent those of ISSI)



The Russian president ordered its nuclear deterrence forces to high alert on February 27, 2022. This came in the wake of the Ukraine crisis that started on February 24, when the Russian President announced a “special military operation” in Ukraine. The announcement was accompanied by a warning that “to anyone who would consider interfering from the outside - if you do, you will face consequences greater than any you have faced in history.”¹ Moving nuclear forces to high alert has raised a number of questions, doubts on what it actually means as well as fears that the Ukraine crisis may escalate to a nuclear level. Thus, it is important to look at what it means, how the US and West sees the nuclear alert status and how they have responded.

Russian President Putin called the Defence Minister, Sergei Shoigu, and military Chief of Staff, Valery Gerasimov, to a public meeting and told them to “transfer the deterrence forces of the Russian army to a special mode of combat duty” in response to “aggressive statements” over Ukraine by NATO leaders. There has been quite a debate among analysts on what this entails in practice. Most agree that this may put the nuclear forces on a higher state of readiness. Others like the British Defence Secretary, Ben Wallace, said that it was a term not included in the Russian doctrine but was most

¹ Steve Rosenberg, “Ukraine Invasion: Would Putin Press the Nuclear Button?” *BBC*, March 1, 2022, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-60551140>

likely meant to scare the West and “remind the world he’s got a deterrent.”² Wallace has also speculated that Russia might use tactical nuclear weapons.

The US and the West have called it a dangerous and unnecessary step. Statements from the Pentagon have stressed that the “US and Russia long agreed that nuclear employment could have devastating consequences. The P-5 agreed that nuclear war cannot be won and must never be fought. In order to ensure that the US actions cannot be misconstrued or cause any escalation, the US has postponed its Minuteman III test scheduled for the first week of March.”³ Pentagon Press Secretary, John Kirby, in a March 2 briefing said that both the US and Russia should recognise escalation risks and take steps to reduce them.

What does the Russian nuclear alert mean? It seems to be designed for political impact. Putin seems to be warning the US and West to back off from interfering in Ukraine. Reportedly, the US military and intelligence sources have not detected any change in Russia’s strategic nuclear forces posture since Putin’s alert. Russia nuclear submarines did, however, sail for exercises in the Barents Sea and there are also reports of mobile missile launchers moving in Siberian forests.⁴ Russia may or may not bring any change in its nuclear force posture status. However, there are signs that the US and NATO are not taking the Russian nuclear alert lightly. The US has increased flights of E-6 aircraft, which is a critical part of the US nuclear command-and-control network. France has deployed a second nuclear-powered submarine that carries nuclear missiles since the alert.⁵

There is an added nuclear danger in Ukraine. It operates a nuclear power plant that is under threat and can potentially cause a nuclear disaster. Ukrainian Foreign Minister, Dmytro Kuleba, sent out a tweet earlier in March saying the Zaporizhzhia nuclear power plant was under Russian fire. As a result a training building was destroyed but the reactors were safe. He said that it had the potential to cause a nuclear disaster ten times greater than the 1986 Chernobyl disaster. The Zaporizhzhia nuclear power has been under Russian command since March 4. The International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) has raised concerns over the safety and security of the plant. The IAEA Director General, Rafael Mariano Grossi, has said that the Russian military command over the nuclear plant “contravenes one of the seven indispensable pillars of nuclear safety and security” according to

2 Dan Sabbagh, “Would Vladimir Putin actually use Nuclear Weapons?” *The Guardian*, February 28, 2022, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/feb/28/russia-nuclear-weapons-putin-threat>

3 Pentagon Press Secretary John F. Kirby Holds a Press Briefing, March 2, 2022, <https://www.defense.gov/News/Transcripts/Transcript/Article/2952916/pentagon-press-secretary-john-f-kirby-holds-a-press-briefing/>

4 Demetri Sevastopulo and Akila Quinio, “Putin puts world on alert with high-stakes nuclear posturing,” *Financial Times*, March 7, 2022, <https://www.ft.com/content/6d236d2d-26c6-40f1-8d12-e6cc2a3aacf0>

5 Ibid

which the operating staff must be able to carry out their safety and security duties and make decisions “free of undue pressure.”⁶

Whenever nuclear weapon powers are involved in a conflict there are chances of escalation. Russian high alert status raises risks of both deliberate and inadvertent nuclear escalation. Russia has made it clear that any backing of Ukraine in the ongoing crisis will lead to escalation and possible use of nuclear weapons. While nuclear weapons have not been used since 1945 Hiroshima and Nagasaki bombings, the specter of nuclear use cannot be ruled out. This is a scary moment where Russia is essentially pitted against the US, NATO and the West. While the war is taking place in Ukraine, the US and NATO back Ukraine. In this scenario, smallest actions can be misconstrued and lead to escalation.

World nuclear forces, January 2021

Country	Deployed warheads*	Other warheads**	Total 2021	Total 2020
USA	1 800	3 750	5 550	5 800
Russia	1 625	4 630	6 255	6 375
UK***	120	105	225	215
France	280	10	290	290
China		350	350	320
India		156	156	150
Pakistan		165	165	160
Israel		90	90	90
North Korea****	...	[40–50]	[40–50]	[30–40]
Total	3 825	9 255	13 080	13 400

Source: SIPRI Yearbook 2021.

*‘Deployed warheads’ refers to warheads placed on missiles or located on bases with operational forces.

**‘Other warheads’ refers to stored or reserve warheads and retired warheads awaiting dismantlement.

The West has already mounted maximum pressure tactics, including extensive economic sanctions, considering imposing a ban on Russian oil and gas imports in Europe, and resolutions in the UN General Assembly condemning Russian actions in Ukraine. These are indirect tactics to pressure Russia. The Biden administration has requested US\$10 billion in humanitarian, military and

⁶ “IAEA Director General Statement on Situation in Ukraine,” March 6, 2022, <https://www.iaea.org/newscenter/pressreleases/update-13-iaea-director-general-statement-on-situation-in-ukraine>

economic support for Ukraine.⁷ There are also a number of other measures that are being considered to pressure Russia. If there is military involvement of NATO and the US in Ukraine it can trigger an escalation to a nuclear level. While both Russia and the US are rational actors and have managed to avoid a nuclear confrontation even at the height of the Cold War, it cannot be ruled out entirely in the current Ukraine crisis. Thus, all sides involved need to tread with caution. A nuclear war is in no one's interest. Between the US and Russia, they have enough nuclear weapons to destroy the world many times over. This is a fact that needs to be kept firmly in mind. This should be a sobering thought that should lead all sides to tread with extreme caution.

⁷ "Ukraine Set to Get More Military, Humanitarian Aid from US," VOA, March 6, 2022, <https://www.voanews.com/a/6472487.html>