

All Blushes of Autumn: Russia’s Evolving “Red Lines” in the War on Ukraine

PONARS Eurasia Policy Memo No. 860
October 2023

Polina Sinovets¹
Odesa I.I. Mechnikov National University

Early in the morning of February 24, 2022, Russian President Vladimir Putin announced Russia’s brutal attack on Ukraine. In his televised speech, he [stated](#): “Whoever tries to hinder us or threaten our country or our people should know that Russia’s response will be immediate and will lead you to consequences that you have never faced in your history.” This explicit allusion to the possible use of nuclear weapons has defined the war. Following the invasion, the “nuclear trump card” appeared in Russian official and media rhetoric almost monthly, hinting at the contours of the new “red line” Moscow had drawn for the West. Almost anything was declared by Moscow to be a possible *casus belli* for nuclear war.

As time went on, however, it became clear that some of the “red lines” Russia had drawn were not that red: they were more coercive tools than genuine red lines. By 2023, the West had discovered that neither increasing the supply of weapons to Ukraine nor Moscow’s loss of annexed territories had prompted any serious response from Russia—as if its so-called red lines were shifting or were not actually there at all. By analyzing the different definitions of what could constitute Russia’s red lines, this memo concludes that it is unlikely that the West has already crossed them. That being said, the nuclear card is never far from the Kremlin’s hand; future threats should therefore be expected.

Main Definitions and Chronology

To avoid misperceptions, let us follow Bruno Tertrais in [defining](#) red lines as “the manipulation of an adversary’s intent through (mostly public) statements for deterrence purposes, referring to the deliberate crossing of a certain threshold by an adversary and relevant counteraction if this threshold is crossed.” During the war on Ukraine, there have

¹ Dr. Polina Sinovets is a Founder and a Head of the Odesa Center for Nonproliferation (OdCNP) at Odesa I.I. Mechnikov National University (Ukraine). This memo is based on a forthcoming NATO Defense College policy brief, “Fifty Shades of Red: Where Does Russia Draw Its Line?”, that is expected to be published in November 2023.

been a number of Russian messages that Russia has tried to present as its “red lines.” The aforementioned first warning, on February 24, clearly instructed NATO states to refrain from direct interference in the war. On February 27, reacting to Ukraine’s request that NATO shield the Ukrainian sky from Russian missiles (by providing Kyiv with air defenses and aircraft), Putin declared that he was putting Russia’s nuclear forces on high alert. Whatever this meant, it [provoked](#) the cancellation of the deal to supply Poland’s MIG-29 bombers to Ukraine, an agreement that had been supported by the United States.

In late May 2022, when the US adopted a bill on comprehensive military aid to Ukraine, Moscow [emitted](#) a new threat, declaring “intolerable” the supply of long-range systems to Kyiv. Putin himself emphasized that Russia had “sufficient quantities [of weapons] to strike those facilities that we are not attacking so far,” hinting at a possible escalation of the war if the long-range missile systems were supplied to Ukraine. One of the most intimidating messages came in Putin’s speech of September 21, which was dedicated to the official annexation of the conquered Ukrainian regions. In formally declaring these territories to be Russian, Putin [tried](#) his “art of commitment,” putting himself, to quote Thomas C. Schelling, “in a position where we cannot fail to react as we said we would.” The legal incorporation of the annexed territories automatically pushed Russia into a *fait accompli* scenario in which it was legally impossible to return these territories to Ukraine, therefore giving Moscow the strongest possible resolve to defend its acquisitions.

In his speech, Putin [claimed](#) that “if Russia feels its territorial integrity is threatened, we will use all defense methods at our disposal, and this is not a bluff.” However, Moscow has not followed through on this threat, even in the wake of the Ukrainian counteroffensive operation that returned the annexed Kherson to Ukraine and pushed the frontline closer to Crimea. Moreover, Ukraine has conducted behind-enemy-lines operations on Russian territory without provoking a nuclear response. For example, the Ukrainian drone attacks on the Russian military bases housing Tu-95 and Tu-160 dual capable bombers in Saratov, Bryansk, and Kursk oblasts on December 5-6 were performed over the internationally recognized territory of the Russian Federation. Similarly, more recent attacks on the Kerch Bridge and various Russian military installations on Crimea, as well as on the Russian fleet and headquarters in Sevastopol, have not been met with a Russian nuclear response.

Early 2023 was marked by the further erosion of something that had previously been considered a Russian red line. The US and some of its allies [decided](#) to supply Ukraine with more advanced weapons, such as tanks and F-16 aircraft. Commenting on this, Russian Ambassador to the US Anatoly Antonov indicated that any Ukrainian strike on Crimea would be considered a strike on Russia, while Russian Foreign Minister Lavrov [called](#) the provision of these weapons an “unacceptable escalation.” Yet the West continues to flagrantly cross all Russia’s supposed red lines by delivering arms and holding discussions about ways to support Ukraine.

Red Lines: A Spectrum of Color

Notwithstanding the West's apparently relaxed attitude toward Russia's red lines, there is an ongoing debate about what Russia's red lines really are. Which actions on the part of the West might cause Moscow to move from angry words to military escalation, whether conventional or nuclear? Based on expert interviews and a number of policy memos, I distinguish three currents of opinion on this issue, which can be positioned along a spectrum of perception from "dark red" to "light pink."

The most radical view of Russia's boundaries (dark red) holds that the West could easily cross Moscow's red lines without noticing, precipitating an unexpected escalation. Russia has been carefully trying to cultivate this perspective since the beginning of the war, with many voices (Russian officials and mass media, and even some Western analysts) [hinting](#) that any attempt to help Ukraine might result in nuclear escalation.

For example, Russian experts [designated](#) the supply of long-range weapons to Ukraine (with a view to perpetrating attacks on Russian cities akin to the Russian strikes on Ukraine) as a "red line" able to trigger the escalation of the conflict to nuclear level. This echoed Putin's May 2022 speech claiming the "intolerability" of supplying long-range weapons to Ukraine.

Some experts predict that if the West keeps disregarding these "red lines," it will result in a "last straw that broke the camel's back" scenario in which military escalation happens unexpectedly in response to earlier measures. On March 26, a Russian TV program, "Moscow. Kremlin. Putin," screened an interview with the Russian president in which he [answered](#) a journalist's question about "red lines." "All these supplies of tanks, aircrafts, and now depleted uranium shells to Ukraine. Many people think it is not only red lines, but already purple lines, that have been crossed," said the journalist, to which Putin responded, "Yes, they do."

For those in a second camp (light pink), Russia's constant use of nuclear threats has eroded, if not their deterrence value, then at least their coercive potential. Those who subscribe to this view take a completely different view of Russian "red lines," seeing these supposed "margins" as nothing more than imaginative constructions on the part of the Western research community, who have their own rationales for perceiving them as ultimatums. From this standpoint, while these propagandistic claims aim to stoke Western leaders' and experts' fears of escalation, such fears are mostly hollow and are the de-facto products of Moscow's active coercion.

In the view of this second camp, being intimidated by Russian rhetoric simply opens the door to legitimizing Russian nuclear coercion based on the threat of nuclear escalation. However, this attempted coercion completely lacks the magic element that would give it power: credibility. In October 2022, in response to Putin's speech about "using all means

available” to retain the annexed territories, the Biden administration [sent](#) strong signals to the Russian leadership that any use of nuclear weapons against Ukraine would be met with an allied US, UK, and French conventional strike on Russia. Later that autumn, Putin and then the Ministry of Foreign Affairs ruled out the possibility of Russia carrying out a nuclear attack on Ukraine. This seems to suggest that the United States’ deterrent messaging was strong enough to get Russia to back down. Moscow’s threats obviously lacked credibility even in the eyes of Putin, who was not ready to risk escalation with the West.

As this example illustrates, the second perspective is based on the idea that the war on Ukraine has been limited to date by the fact that Russia is concerned with avoiding direct military confrontation with NATO. To wit, Moscow has neither bombarded NATO weapons convoys on Ukrainian territory nor perpetrated a massive genocide against the local population (in contrast with the carpet bombings of cities that prevailed during the Second World War, as well as in Chechnya and Syria); the Kremlin may see this as a NATO “red line” and be hesitant to cross it lest doing so trigger stronger involvement on the part of the Alliance. In this regard, Putin can be considered a cautious and rational leader who clearly prefers safe outcomes to dangerous ones. This approach assumes that Russia is just as uninterested in nuclear escalation as NATO and will not risk its own physical destruction.

The third approach (classic red, or “Russian red”) posits that Russian red lines have not yet been crossed yet. Accordingly, it [relies](#) on the concept of basic deterrence, contending that nuclear force can be used in response to a conventional use of force that calls the existence of the state into jeopardy. The Kremlin’s primary fear, which brings with it the possibility of escalation, is Russia’s strategic defeat, an idea that started to circulate recently among Russian political elites. Though “strategic defeat” has never been clearly defined, Putin has interpreted it to include both regime change and Russia’s collapse—a scenario he [presents](#) as the West’s ultimate goal in the ongoing war.

In his speech before the Federal Assembly, the Russian president [explained](#) his suspension of the New START treaty by reference to the West’s pursuit of the “strategic defeat of Russia.” Along similar lines, some commentators tend to see the outcome of the war in Ukraine as decisive for the survival of the Putin regime. The infamous Sergey Karaganov, who earlier this year proposed using nuclear weapons against the West to “sober” the latter in its support for Ukraine, [wrote](#) in a September article that “a war with the West in Ukraine is existential for us, or our determination to win, including, in the worst case, through the use of the most severe measures.” However, the article looks less like a genuine recommendation and more like an attempt on the part of the regime to show that there can be always worse options than Russia is currently employing and worse people in power than Putin.

Sometimes experts connect “Russian strategic defeat” with the geographic dimension. Crimea is considered to be of particular symbolic significance to Russia, a point indirectly

demonstrated by Moscow's furious attack on the Ukrainian electricity networks in retaliation for Kyiv's strike on the Kerch bridge.² This significance is likely due to the fact that the annexation of Crimea, which was supported by the absolute majority of the Russian population, represents the core of Putin's legitimacy as a "unifier" of Russian lands. The same may arguably be said of Donbas, the defense of which has become the official reason for Putin's "special operation" against Ukraine.

However, in spite of the recently adopted Russian laws on the integration of Donbas, this was not a commonly accepted narrative before the last year. Indeed, the entire debate over the Minsk agreements in 2015-2022 shows that, unlike Crimea, Donbas has not historically been perceived by Russians as part of their territory.³ Therefore, the issue of Crimea sometimes is presented as the most sensitive. However, this idea does not enjoy universal support even among Russian experts. In particular, Alexey Arbatov [suggests](#) that while Russia may rhetorically threaten nuclear escalation in response to the Ukrainian counteroffensive, "it can't be the real reason for nuclear war... as the new subjects of the Russian Federation can't be regarded as a guarantee of its existence. Because Russia existed without them [these territories] before."

Russian Red Lines and the West

Can it be said that the West has already crossed Russia's red lines? This seems highly unlikely: If Russia's red lines had been crossed, then Russia would have escalated the conflict.

While the mass media and various officials have spoken frequently about Russian "red lines," Putin has made just three speeches that might allow us to trace their contours. The first was the speech about the launch of the war on Ukraine, the second was the May speech about the non-delivery of long-range arms to Ukraine, and the third was the September annexation speech. Some of the red lines outlined in these speeches have come to be disregarded, while others are still respected by the West.

In particular, no NATO state has engaged in a direct military confrontation with Russia. Moreover, the determination of the Biden administration to avoid nuclear war with Russia has resulted in very slow decision-making regarding the supply of lethal weapons to Ukraine. Yes, the West has increased its level of arms delivery to Ukraine and included ever-more-sophisticated weapons. Yet it has also been quite careful to keep its distance from Russia's real "red lines." Indeed, the weapons initially supplied to Ukraine were more weapons of survival than weapons of victory. As an April 2023 Atlantic Council report [observed](#), "Thus far, the West has communicated that the best that it can muster when it comes to vertical escalation is to second-guess and, ultimately, self-deter." Of course, one might argue that this has been less self-deterrence than Russian red lines

² Author's interview with Rose Gottemueller, April 10, 2023.

³ Ibid.

effectively coercing the West not to take steps undesired by Moscow. However, we can also observe a certain shift in U.S. policy here with the Biden administration’s September 2023 decision to [supply](#) ATACMS to Ukraine. This change points to the declining power of Russian coercive efforts vis-à-vis the West.

Meanwhile, the Ukrainian counteroffensive—which recaptured some territories in the South without any real escalation from Russia—has likewise demonstrated the declining credibility of Russia’s coercive threats. There are some expectations that Russia may escalate the conflict as Ukraine achieves continued strategic victories; the success of the offensive to take Crimea, for instance, might increase Moscow’s sense that defeat in the war is inevitable.⁴ Also, the more Moscow exhausts its conventional arsenal, the higher the likelihood of a whole spectrum of nuclear responses that have to date been constrained by the United States’ quite explicit deterrent rhetoric.

In sum, Moscow had to expand its margins of acceptable because its badly veiled threat to use nuclear weapons against Ukraine threatened to cross the West’s own “red lines.” However, the nuclear card is never far from the Kremlin’s hand. The suspension of New START, the withdrawal from the CTBT (which carries with it the possibility of resuming nuclear tests in the future), as well as Moscow’s declaration of its intent to deploy nuclear weapons in Belarus—all these steps have taken place in the nuclear domain, and one may expect that Russia will go on to make other types of nuclear threats.

PONARS ● NEW APPROACHES
● TO RESEARCH AND
E U R A S I A ● SECURITY IN EURASIA

**Elliott School of
International Affairs**

THE GEORGE WASHINGTON UNIVERSITY

© PONARS Eurasia 2023. The statements made and views expressed are solely the responsibility of the author. PONARS Eurasia is an international network of scholars advancing new approaches to research on security, politics, economics, and society in Russia and Eurasia. PONARS Eurasia is based at the [Institute for European, Russian and Eurasian Studies \(IERES\)](#) at the George Washington University’s Elliott School of International Affairs. This publication was made possible in part by a grant from Carnegie Corporation of New York. www.ponarseurasia.org

⁴ Author’s interview with Marc Ozawa, April 13, 2023.