

TOP SECRET - Russia's Nuclear Threat

TOP SECRET - FOR YOUR EYES ONLY

While this report does not contain any actual classified information, we are discussing sensitive topics in this as well as in the next two T-Reports:

- **Russia's Nuclear Threat**
- **OPEC+**
- **The Defense of Taiwan**

Today we will address Russia's nuclear threat.

I have the luxury of working with 17 retired generals and admirals ([Academy's Geopolitical Intelligence Group](#) "GIG"). They have all served their country admirably and apolitically. They offer great insight into the military and the government and have been crucial in helping Academy's clients understand and navigate this treacherous landscape. Many have gone on to serve this country further (in their role as civilians) by shaping transitions, forming policy, and more. They have great knowledge and understanding of how the country's geopolitical apparatus works.

I am relying heavily on the experience, thoughts, wisdom, and views of this amazing resource to craft today's report. To make this report the most interesting, I will push the envelope. We will not only examine the consensus views but also explore some of the outlier views. It is essential for us to think about many alternative narratives and not just what we get from the mainstream media.

By necessity, some parts of today's report might sound political. However, whether it is my views or the views of some of those who I relied on for their insight, the intention here is not to be political.

We need to evaluate the politics, what politicians have done (and might have to do), and the potential consequences. Not everyone on the GIG sees eye to eye with the current/prior policies or how our adversaries will respond. They do have well-formed opinions on why they agree or disagree with what is going on and the consequences of those actions or inactions.

This philosophy permeates the T-Report, but since we really want to push the envelope in this report, considering the dangerous and potentially precarious geopolitical environment we are in, I felt that it was important to lay out the foundation.

The selection of views are mine alone and any misinterpretation, simplification, combination, or omission are solely my responsibility.

Russia's Nuclear Threat

On Saturday, Academy published a SITREP on the [Kerch Strait Bridge](#). Yet another setback in a long string of setbacks for the Russians. Both Generals (ret.) Marks and Walsh felt the need to address the nuclear ramifications of this attack as it is top of mind for everyone. Their responses highlight not only the importance of the nuclear question, but the range of opinions.

The overwhelming consensus of the GIG is that a nuclear attack, in any form, remains a low probability event. While Putin apparently has no issue wielding it as a threat, it is a threat that he is highly unlikely to follow through on as it will certainly turn world opinion against him (and risks the survival of Russia and the West). Prevailing winds are also a concern for Putin, and the planning for any nuclear attack would have to consider weather forecasts that ensure the wind is blowing away from Russia.

TOP SECRET - Russia's Nuclear Threat

Having said that, we spend a lot of time discussing what it would take for Putin to use nuclear weapons and/or how he would create a nuclear event. **Even if it is a low probability, it is worth thinking about.** A few topics (some incredibly uncomfortable) come up frequently in this discussion that seem to influence the views of members of the GIG and Putin.

- **Tactical versus Strategic Nukes.** The U.S. does not differentiate between nuclear weapons based on the size of the payload. We treat all nuclear weapons as the same and all are controlled by the President of the United States. As a matter of policy, NATO is clear on the message that a “nuke is a nuke.” Russia does not treat nuclear weapons that way. In the Russian doctrine, they separate tactical nukes (smaller payloads, i.e., ones that could be used on the battlefield) from strategic nukes (ICBM's that can devastate cities from a long range). **This difference in doctrine is critical.** The more one believes that Russia understands our doctrine and will abide by it, the less likely one is to think that Russia will resort to nuclear weapons. Conversely, the more one believes that Russia views their doctrine as appropriate and that the world (possibly including NATO) would differentiate their response based on the type of attack, then it is more likely to believe that the use of a nuclear weapon by Russia is possible. **We need to be very careful that we don't apply our own morality and doctrine to Putin's potential logic as that could underestimate the threat.**
- **NATO was not supposed to expand and was meant to be defensive.**
 - NATO told Russia that it would not expand the number of countries in NATO. However, it has expanded and included countries that border Russia and some that were formerly part of the Soviet Union. From Putin's perspective, this paints NATO as a liar.
 - NATO invoked Article 5 to support the operations in Afghanistan. This was in response to the terrorist attacks in the U.S. on 9/11. An attack on one NATO member is an attack on all and there is a logic to “defending” by “attacking,” but that logic is something that Putin believes is a danger to him. It isn't relevant whether that view is logical to “us,” but it is important that it does permeate his thought process.
- **The only country to ever use a nuclear weapon is the U.S.** It was an action taken only after immense consideration, but from a Russian perspective, it makes many of our arguments sound at least somewhat hollow.

Even with that modicum of background, it is easy to see how careful we need to be when thinking about Putin's nuclear threats. From our perspective, they can easily be seen as nothing more than bluster, but he may view them as rational, and may be able to convince his people of this as well. **There are consequences to our prior actions.** For better or worse, that is a theme that will occur with frequency in today's T-Report.

Before delving into the nuclear option, another question needs to be tossed out because it helps frame not just the likelihood of an attack, but the nature of an attack.

What was the invasion really about?

Was it about Russia reconciling with the Ukrainian people? Was it more limited to “allow” the Russians in the East to be part of Russia? Was it about land? Or a **buffer zone**? Or even about **commodities**? As you move from the start of the list, the less likely the nuclear option is to be used. However, as you

TOP SECRET - Russia's Nuclear Threat

move to the end of the list, the easier it is to develop strategies that fit the tactical nuke option. You cannot nuke an area and have a population that survives this attack want anything to do with you! On the other hand, an irradiated region may act as an effective buffer zone.

Potential Responses Matter

Before discussing their options and what might drive them to take nuclear action, we need to address the two main calculations Russia must make:

- **What will NATO do?** Will NATO respond with a nuclear attack of its own? Within the GIG, the view is that a nuclear strike would not be our first response. Would NATO supply Ukraine with more weapons? Almost certainly, but what will Ukrainian morale be like after a nuclear attack? Will there be battlefields that can't even be entered again? Will NATO put troops into action to restore the pre-2014 boundaries? Would we attack Russia itself? Or would NATO be too afraid to risk further escalation that we'd go to the negotiating table after making all sorts of pointless threats via the UN and other organizations? This question gets the most discussion and is difficult to estimate without knowing the exact nature of the attack.
- **What will China and India do?** We could even ask "what will the rest of the world do"? We already know the West would impose even more sanctions on Russia. But sadly, what really matters most to Russia is how China would treat them after such an event. They'd probably like India to continue to trade with them, but it is China they really need. If they can keep selling commodities to China and buying goods from China (possibly military hardware over time), then they may feel more comfortable taking action. It seems difficult to believe that India would continue to engage with Russia after any sort of nuclear attack. China, on the other hand, is a bigger question (see March 2022's [Who Needs Who?](#)). If we are at the cusp of a global realignment - where China embraces the autocratic nations of the world in the competition for natural resources (and as a market for their finished goods), they might under some circumstances be convinced to continue to do business with Russia. There is immense pushback on this issue, but nuclear attacks were likely discussed when Putin met with Xi and the fact that the rhetoric increased after that meeting is concerning to some. From my perspective, **a nuclear option that can keep China as a trade counterparty would be Russia's first choice if it comes to nuclear.**

Nuclear Option 1 - Attacking Nuclear Plants with Conventional Weapons

This is the risk that Russia attacks the Zaporizhzhia nuclear plant, for example, as General (ret.) Walsh points out in the recent SITREP. There are other smaller plants that could be attacked and they could also possibly do something in the Chernobyl region.

There are a few "**positives**" from this type of nuclear action from the Russian perspective:

- **They themselves would have only used conventional weapons.** They would use that argument to reduce the moral outrage across the globe. At some level, it depends on how desperate you are for Russian commodities whether you "accept" their argument or not. It may seem flimsy to us, but we are not the ones currently buying Russian commodities en masse. Is this a scenario that China, for example, could admonish Russia publicly but still keep the trade relationship

TOP SECRET - Russia's Nuclear Threat

open?

- **It would add to the woeful power situation in Europe.** Knocking out the largest power plant in Europe would add to the problems facing those remaining in Ukraine and would have more widespread effects as humanitarian efforts to save people from freezing would have to be taken. This is cruel, but war is cruel and there has been no shortage of cruelty already in this war.

There are some unique "negatives" from the Russian perspective going this route:

- **Unpredictable.** How a conventional attack on a nuclear plant would play out is unpredictable. Cutting off the energy is predictable, but the type of devastation seems difficult to predict. How big would an explosion be? What would the fallout be? Something that is uncontrolled, which a conventional attack severely damaging a nuclear reactor would be, is unpredictable. Russia may want predictability (even their doctrine distinguishes between tactical and strategic nukes).
- **Not repeatable.** One tactical nuke would be "repeatable." That turns their threat into action but also highlights the greater threat. While attacking a plant is certainly escalation, it doesn't feed quite as easily into the overall fear Russia would be trying to create.

Nuclear Option 2 - A Tactical Nuke

For now, even in our most aggressive "hypotheticals" a couple of things are off the table:

- **Definitely no attack on a large civilian population.** Any attack on a city or even a village of any size with any type of nuclear weapon (no matter how small) would trigger a NATO response and likely turn world opinion so against Russia that even their staunchest supporters couldn't keep their economy functioning. It would end any narrative that Putin is "rescuing" his people. Given where we are now, no one in the GIG sees an attack on civilians as possible.
- **Highly unlikely to be used against military forces.** While not as vile as an attack on civilians, it seems difficult to believe that they could walk back from this. This isn't a "trench warfare" type of battle where they could, in their own mind, justify it by knocking out some deeply entrenched troops that were inflicting major damage on them. Add to that the risk of civilian deaths/making a region uninhabitable and it just doesn't seem to fit any possible Russia agenda. Russia will stick to conventional weapons for the ground war.

So, what could they do?

- **A "symbolic" attack?** Could they launch a tactical nuke at some uninhabited, isolated part of the world, say in the Arctic Circle? Yes, but what would that really achieve? Russia would turn world opinion against them just by launching such an attack (though, probably not enough to encourage some of their trading partners to stop trading with them). On the other hand, would it strike fear into the hearts of Ukraine and NATO? While it would demonstrate their willingness, it might almost be too cautious to create the fear intended.
- **A nuclear attack on a key resource.** Of all the "wargames" where the GIG goes beyond the "it won't happen" scenario, the most plausible outcome is hitting some element of industrial production, raw resources, or a pipeline in a largely uninhabited region. That would have the benefit, from a Russian perspective, of:
 - **Demonstrating that they would use a nuke.**

TOP SECRET - Russia's Nuclear Threat

- **Hurting the Ukrainian economy while potentially not drawing the wrath of the entire world.** If you want (or need) to trade with Russia bad enough, the "caution" to avoid civilian casualties might help justify at least somewhat overlooking the attack.
- **It may increase the price of Russia's commodities.** Depending on what they take out (and realizing that the radiation would make the resources unusable for decades), their own unaffected sources of those commodities would increase in value.

What Could Provoke an Attack?

- **The "easy" answer is direct involvement of NATO forces.** This seems unlikely to occur without significant Russian provocation. The Ukrainians are doing well enough with the equipment being provided that "NATO boots" on the ground seem unlikely. NATO is also so aware of the risk of escalation that it is incredibly unlikely that it would precipitate such an action.
- **Russia risks "losing" the war.** This is the dirty question and one where some in the GIG say "no" as the response, but their body language and tone betrays some amount of residual fear that the answer might be "yes." **Never, that I can remember, have we seen a situation where winning could be tantamount to losing!**
 - Can Putin accept losing not just initial gains from this war, but potentially gains since this all really started back in 2014? Can he survive that? For Putin, it may not even be a matter of accepting, which may affect his calculus.
 - **Can Ukraine accept any deal that gives concessions to Russia?** Ukraine and her supporters have been emboldened by the successes. Suddenly, Crimea, is in play. Can Ukraine come to the table with something that Putin can live with? Could Ukraine accept the seemingly "sham" referendums in the Eastern Oblasts to give Putin something to hang on to and claim victory? He does, apparently, now view that land as Russia's. This seemingly "sham" referendum may mean more to him than we realize, especially as he could now "justify" to the Russian people that Ukrainian attacks there now represent an attack on the Motherland, which in turn justifies escalation.

Of everything we've covered so far, the belief that Russia could go down without swinging seems to be discussed with more vigor than it is believed. That is concerning given the current situation with the war and public opinion across the globe.

I'm not sure where this fits in, but on October 3rd, Elon Musk created a [poll on twitter](#) (that received over 2.5 million votes) on his view of what we should do with Ukraine and Russia. While his intention seems to be de-escalation, the comments are quite visceral in this thread and highlight the difficulties of finding any "endgame" that appeases everyone.

Does any Attack Lead to Retaliation and Escalation?

This is actually two questions:

Do we Retaliate?

- **Almost certainly.** In a report full of uncertainty, this is one area that is certain. Any nuclear action of any type will draw a response. But **that response or retaliation will be measured relative to the Russian attack itself.**

TOP SECRET - Russia's Nuclear Threat

Do we Escalate? This is tricky on many levels.

- **The more likely we are to escalate the less likely Russia is to attack, but any initial attack would likely be very aggressive.** If we aren't likely to escalate, Russia may be more willing to try some limited attack knowing that our response is likely to be cautious. If, on the other hand, they expect a strong response, they will hold off.
- **What could we do to retaliate without serious escalation?** We could possibly take out a Russian silo or even demonstrate that we could do the same to a nuclear sub. Russia would "win" in that they launched some sort of attack without setting the world on a path to destruction. But what have we taught the bully? How does this really discourage them from making the next attack?
- **How does Russia mitigate the response?** The theory that I like best for de-escalation involves Putin turning on the general who allegedly ordered the tactical nuke or the strike against the nuclear power plant. He then "changes" their doctrine so that he holds the keys to tactical and strategic nukes (i.e., it would no longer be a battlefield commander's decision for tactical use). This will all be theater as he would have orchestrated the use, but it might be enough in a world where no one really wants this to devolve into WW III.

Two Russian Outliers

What if Russia's nuclear weaponry is as shoddy as their conventional weaponry?

Is it possible that unlike our weapons systems, where we meticulously maintain their readiness and troops and commanders are trained to the n^{th} degree in their use, Russia's systems are not as capable?

For now, we have to fear the worst: their nuclear threat is real, it is incredibly dangerous, and their missiles are cable of launching (and some can avoid destruction by NATO forces). However, that isn't the point of raising this question.

What if Putin, for all his machismo, is scared that if he fires even a tactical nuke and it fails to detonate, all bets are off for him? Seems unlikely but worth thinking about.

What if commanders refuse to obey orders?

Revolts can often start with one simple action turning into a stampede. What if there are generals who would view the nuclear option as too great of a risk to take? Sure, Putin could shoot one general and replace him with another, but even he may have to be careful about giving an order that doesn't get obeyed. It might be one thing to launch rockets at civilian targets in a different country, but taking an action that could result in fire and brimstone on your own country could be a step too far even for the most ardent follower. I would not hang my hat on either of these. but there are slivers of hope to think about.

Negotiations Without Communication

While this goes well beyond the nuclear discussion, the vast preponderance of our GIG sees very little effective dialogue with Russia. It isn't just our fault, but it is difficult to come to any agreement without communication. By their definition, back-channel discussions are difficult to observe, but I do not get a sense from our GIG that they currently see the signs of such back-channel discussions.

TOP SECRET - Russia's Nuclear Threat

That is problematic.

A Long-Winded Way of Saying “Unlikely”

One criticism of this report could be that we have spent a lot of your precious time to conclude that a nuclear option is unlikely. I disagree, as I think that laying out the foundation as seen by our GIG (and interpreted by me) gives us a base level of understanding and highlights what we need to be looking for in assessing whether the risks are increasing or dissipating.

I never thought I'd have to write about nuclear war (the last time I wrote about the “nuclear option” it was about underfunded companies writing “super-senior” protection), but I cannot think of a seat that gives us more insight into this incredibly difficult and anxiety ridden topic.

Hopefully, this establishes our current view on the situation and what to watch out for.

We will continue this series of behind-the-scenes thoughts on OPEC+ and Defending Taiwan.

TOP SECRET - Russia's Nuclear Threat

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