

Thinking the Unthinkable: How Might the EU Prepare for and React to a Russian Nuclear Strike on Ukraine?

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The use of nuclear weapons in Ukraine would create, for the EU and the West more broadly, the most dangerous moment in international security since the Cuban missile crisis. The EU needs to prepare for this eventuality and develop response options.

Russia's nuclear sabre-rattling

Russia's leader Vladimir Putin has engaged in sabre-rattling against the West. The Kremlin seeks to deter Europe and the US from supplying Ukraine with additional arms and other equipment, which the country needs to defend itself from Russia's unprovoked invasion. In September 2022, Putin gave a [speech](#) in which he resorted to thinly veiled nuclear blackmail. He reminded Europe and the US that Russia possesses "different types of weapons" that it could use against the West "[i]n the event of a threat to the territorial integrity of our country and to defend Russia and our people". "This is not a bluff", he emphasised.

This is not the first time that Putin's Russia has resorted to such nuclear sabre-rattling. During the 2008 Russo-Georgian war, Moscow reserved the right to use [nuclear weapons](#) against Poland after Warsaw agreed to host elements of a US missile defence system on its territory. Following its annexation of Ukraine's Crimea region in 2014, Russia's nuclear weapons were placed in a state of combat readiness. According to Putin, the Kremlin was ready to use them if necessary to defend the annexed peninsula.

The same happened in [February 2022](#) after Russia launched its ongoing attack against Ukraine.

It is worth highlighting that, in Russian military doctrine, the first use of nuclear weapons is seen as a viable option for Russia to respond to military aggression. The [understanding](#) is that Russia reserves the right to use nuclear weapons under specific circumstances when the existence of the state is threatened. In other words, given Russia's official nuclear doctrine and its track record in nuclear sabre-rattling, Putin should be taken seriously.

The possibility of a tactical nuclear strike

Although the Kremlin is unlikely to risk Russia's survival by launching a nuclear attack against the West, analysts and experts believe that there is a [growing risk](#) that Putin could use a nuclear weapon in Ukraine. This would be the first time since the US dropped the Nagasaki bomb on Imperial Japan in 1945 that a nuclear weapon would be used in a combat situation. [Josep Borrell](#), the EU's foreign policy chief, thinks that Putin needs to be taken seriously when he says that Russia is prepared to use its nuclear arsenal. Both US President [Joe Biden](#) and Ukraine's President [Volodymyr Zelenskyy](#) have suggested the same.

While Russia is unlikely to consider using its strategic (i.e., city-destroying) nuclear weapons, analysts believe that Moscow could eventually use a lower-yield tactical nuclear weapon. These are munitions that

are designed for battlefield use. It has been estimated that Russia has around [2,000](#) tactical nuclear weapons. However, even tactical nuclear weapons are devastating instruments. The [GBU-43B](#) Massive Ordnance Air Blast (MOAB), the largest non-nuclear bomb used by the US, has a yield of 11 tons of TNT. By contrast, the warheads of tactical nuclear weapons have a yield of [1-50 kilotons](#). That's a difference of up to 50 kilotons. The bomb dropped on Hiroshima had a yield of 15 kilotons.

If Russia decides to use its nuclear arsenal against Ukraine, [experts](#) believe that it could do so in two main ways. The first option is a demonstrative explosion, a show of force, that would not necessarily kill anyone. It could take place underground, over the Black Sea, high above Ukraine, or on an uninhabited site such as Snake Island. Its main purpose would be to cause fear and deter Ukraine and the West from questioning Russia's military gains in Ukraine. The second and more escalatory possibility is a strike on a Ukrainian military target or a critical infrastructure target such as the Zaporizhzhia nuclear power plant, deliberately turning it into a "dirty bomb". In addition to having the same purpose as a demonstrative explosion, the second option could enable Russia to inflict tactical battlefield damage on Ukraine. The first crossing of the nuclear firebreak since 1945, even with a "tactical" device, could not fail to have major strategic consequences.

Implications for NATO and the EU

Russia's nuclear sabre-rattling has put NATO and the EU in an uncomfortable situation. Both organisations must now plan for a possible Russian nuclear strike in Ukraine. NATO has existing nuclear doctrines in place and its members are protected by [Article 5](#) of the 1949 Washington Treaty, the Alliance's mutual defence clause. However, Ukraine is not a NATO ally and Article 5 does not apply. NATO would be under no treaty obligation to intervene.

However, there has been much discussion in the US about [contingency plans](#) for a possible response to a Russian nuclear attack on Ukraine. Washington warned that there would be "[catastrophic consequences](#)" for Russia if the Kremlin decided to use nuclear weapons in Ukraine. Such "declaratory policy" necessarily remains ambiguous, as it was throughout the Cold War. Although President Biden refuses to

[say publicly](#) what might happen, a [senior US general](#) stated that there would likely be a NATO conventional attack on Russian troop levels in Ukraine and devastation of the Russian Black Sea fleet. The consequences of such Western retaliation are impossible to predict. Biden has spoken darkly of the eventual risk of [Armageddon](#) while insisting that Putin remains a rational actor. The war has entered uncharted territory.

Whatever the US response, NATO's overriding priority will be the deterrence of any further Russian nuclear strike, particularly against the North-Atlantic area itself. NATO would almost certainly place its nuclear forces on high alert to signal to Russia that the Alliance is ready to respond if the Kremlin were to contemplate a further strike, this time on NATO territory. There are [many other options](#) available to NATO, but allies would almost certainly be divided as to the wisdom of increasing the delivery of heavy weapons to Ukraine.

For the EU *per se*, the situation is unprecedented. The Union has never had a serious debate about nuclear weapons in the context of EU defence cooperation, which focuses primarily on joint defence capability development and low-intensity crisis management. The EU has traditionally portrayed itself as a semi-pacifist [normative power](#), which can influence what passes as normal in international relations through the power of its example. Most importantly, EU countries have preferred to leave nuclear weapons-related debates to NATO or keep them in their national capitals. Some are also neutral or non-aligned, or even parties to the [Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons](#), and therefore uncomfortable with discussing nuclear warfare in the Brussels context. Furthermore, France—the EU's only nuclear weapons state after Brexit—sees its nuclear weapons primarily as a national resource. France does not participate in NATO's [Nuclear Planning Group](#), the Alliance's top body on nuclear matters.

However, if Russia would use a nuclear weapon in Ukraine, at the EU's doorstep, the Union would have to react, in some way or another to the most dangerous episode in international security since the 1962 Cuban Missile Crisis. The risk of the Ukraine war escalating into a broader conflict between Russia and the West would be genuine, especially if Russia were

to subsequently strike targets within NATO. A Russian nuclear strike on Ukraine would also likely destroy the UN system and the broader post-World War II global security architecture, from which the EU itself also emerged and which it has always defended strongly. It would also have direct implications for the Union in the form of additional flows of Ukrainian refugees seeking safety within the EU, even if the Russian strike was purely demonstrative. In addition, the Union would be expected to help Ukraine deal with the immediate consequences of the nuclear fallout, which would contaminate land, air, and water within the strike zone for decades.

It is important to emphasise that the EU, as an organisation, is already *de facto* a party to the Ukraine war through the [assistance](#) it has provided to Kyiv since it began. The EU has *inter alia* adopted multiple sanctions packages against Russia since February 2022 and agreed on assistance measures worth €2.5 billion via the European Peace Facility to help Ukraine acquire lethal capabilities and other equipment to defend its sovereignty. Given this and the unprecedented international security situation that a Russian nuclear strike would create, not reacting would simply not be an option for the EU. Otherwise, the credibility of the EU as a security and defence actor would suffer irreparable damage.

Options for the EU

But how could, or should, the EU prepare for and react to a possible Russian nuclear strike in Ukraine? Several measures can be identified.

First, the EU's [Political and Security Committee](#) (PSC) should immediately discuss the potential implications for the Union of a Russian nuclear strike on Ukraine and develop response options. The PSC is a preparatory body of the Council of the EU that oversees the Union's foreign, security, and defence policy. It is composed of ambassador-level diplomats from EU member states and recommends strategic approaches and policy options to the Council. Although neutral EU countries might be nervous about having this kind of discussion in the PSC, it is better to have it *pre facto* rather than *post facto*, to increase the Union's preparedness to deal with a new and unprecedented situation. This PSC meeting should also be attended by senior NATO and Ukrainian officials to ensure that both the Alliance and Ukraine are kept

informed about how the EU perceives the situation and the role that it could play in responding to a Russian nuclear strike. This role ultimately depends on what NATO decides to do, and what—if anything—Ukraine would like the Union to do.

Second, the EU should increase the readiness of its civilian crisis response instruments. These include *inter alia* the [Civil Protection Mechanism](#), which would likely be activated in a post-nuclear strike situation to help Ukraine deal with the resulting human and material destruction. The EU also needs to ensure that it has a sufficient stockpile of potassium iodide tablets within its rescEU strategic reserves. The Union has already pre-emptively provided [5 million potassium iodide tablets](#) to Ukraine via the rescEU reserves, but demand for them would likely skyrocket from Ukraine, from other neighbouring countries, and EU member states themselves following a Russian nuclear strike.

Third, the EU needs to enhance civilian crisis readiness within the Union itself. In a post-nuclear strike situation, NATO would be unquestionably in charge of military security in Europe and deterring Russian strikes on Europe itself. The EU and its security and defence policy would not have a meaningful role to play in this military effort. However, the Union would be required to step up the protection of Europe's critical infrastructure (e.g., energy facilities, traffic infrastructure, hospitals) against sabotage attacks and electromagnetic pulses. The EU could also help the member states in keeping people calm on the European continent. It would be necessary to enhance the readiness of EU instruments dealing with cyber and hybrid attacks, and those tackling hostile disinformation designed to scare European citizens and decrease their confidence in their elected representatives. Although this may sound trivial, the challenge of keeping Europeans calm in a post-nuclear strike situation would likely be extraordinary.

Fourth, the EU would have to respond directly to Russia itself. This response would most likely be both rhetorical and concrete in character. At the very least, the EU would condemn Moscow in the strongest possible way for breaking the norm of not using nuclear weapons in action and calling into question the existence of the rules-based international order. The Union could also launch a diplomatic effort to exclude Russia from the UN Security Council and other struc-

tures of the UN system. The EU would also be expected to tighten its existing Russia sanctions even further, although this would not have significant value in the immediate post-nuclear strike situation. This is because a Russian nuclear strike on Ukraine would also symbolise the failure of the EU's post-2014 sanctions policy on Russia in the most dramatic terms possible.

Fifth, the EU should adopt an additional financial assistance package via the European Peace Facility to help Ukraine's armed forces acquire the equipment needed to shield themselves against the radioactive fallout of Russia's battlefield nuclear weapons. The EPF's budget ceiling should also be increased as soon as possible, given that the EU has already pledged 50% of the EPF's 2021-2027 budget for Ukraine since the beginning of the war in February. There would also be pressure for EU countries to step up the deliveries of heavy weapons systems to Ukraine, but any such deliveries would almost certainly be coordinated by NATO—not the Union—in a post-nuclear strike situation. This is because the sensitivity of European weapons deliveries to Ukraine would increase dramatically, and NATO would have to consider the possibility that they could escalate the situation and increase the likelihood of Europe itself becoming Russia's target.

Longer-term challenges

In the longer term, unfortunately, nuclear weapons-related issues and challenges will need to be factored into the EU's security and defence policy. This is not the case at present. EU member states have tended to eschew any discussion of a hypothetical European nuclear deterrent for the simple reason that they have traditionally been divided on the issue. Such a prospect is bedevilled by political, geostrategic, ethical, scientific, and economic obstacles. Most EU member states prefer America's extended deterrence – with all its imponderables – to any hypothetical European force. The Ukraine crisis has underscored the belief that, in the final analysis, it is US nuclear power that guarantees Europe's existential security. It is assumed that Russia would not have invaded Georgia or Ukraine had they belonged to NATO. That is in large part the reason why Sweden and Finland have rushed to join the Alliance. And although most EU member states were deeply unsettled by former US President Donald Trump's ambivalence about the

credibility of the US nuclear "guarantee", since Putin invaded Ukraine, they have rallied solidly behind strong US leadership in response. This is not, therefore, the moment to be raising the issue of an eventual European nuclear deterrent.

Nevertheless, in the broader context of the clear strategic priority that the US grants to the Asia-Pacific region; in that of a hypothetical "Trump2" presidency after 2024; and in that of European aspirations towards greater strategic autonomy, even *within* NATO, this is a topic that cannot be ignored indefinitely. France has periodically offered to [extend its own nuclear umbrella](#) over the whole of Europe, but this has generally been politely ignored by France's European partners, most of whom would prefer to continue to nestle under the US umbrella. After the Franco-British [Lancaster House Treaty](#) of November 2010, there was some optimism that Europe's two nuclear powers would draw closer together. But it very soon became clear that [three major obstacles](#) limited the scope of a *rapprochement* that had in fact been under discussion for decades: the tightness of the UK's integration into the US nuclear deterrent, different modernisation timelines in Paris and London, and sheer force of habit. With Brexit, most analysts concluded that the UK had abandoned any intention of playing a leading role in an integrated European defence capacity.

There are therefore only two possibilities for the eventual emergence of a European nuclear deterrent force. The first would be that EU member states simply sign up to what France has periodically referred to as *dissuasion élargie* (extended deterrence) or *dissuasion par constat* (de facto deterrence). These declaratory strategies would amount to a signal to any power contemplating military aggression against a member state of the European Union, that in so doing they would be attacking a country with a close ally that possesses nuclear weapons. In other words, French extended deterrence would work exactly in the same way as US extended deterrence is supposed to work. Given that it was precisely France's President de Gaulle who expressed total disbelief in the credibility of the US "umbrella" (no US president would ever put Boston at risk to protect Berlin), the credibility of such a doctrine would hardly appeal.

The other possibility would be that vulnerable EU

states might host French nuclear weapons on their soil for potential participation in an EU deterrent posture. This would present significant legal challenges, as well as imply third-state involvement in the financing of such weapons. However, such is the seriousness with which some European states took President Trump's assault on NATO, that it was recently decided in Germany that such an arrangement could [clear the legal hurdles](#) involved. Such a development would represent a tectonic shift in European security thinking and would crucially require a further seismic shift.

Any decision to resort to nuclear weapons would require a centrality of political command that simply does not exist in Europe and is hard to imagine. Nuclear deterrence is only credible if it is *politically credible* to a potential adversary. At present that is far from being the case. Any EU nuclear deterrent worthy of the name would have to come to terms with this reality. In the US, concerns that the President technically holds the power to order a nuclear strike without consultation have recently led to suggestions that the ultimate decision on crossing the nuclear firebreak should be made by a high-level group that includes leading government and military officials. Such an agency is not unthinkable within the political-institutional framework of the EU. Perhaps the Ukraine crisis will one day stimulate such discussions within the EU.

This is a highly sensitive and deeply unpleasant topic to discuss, but it is a topic that the EU must reflect on, given the extraordinary times we live in. There should no longer be any taboo on security and defence issues that can be discussed in the EU context. The EU can become a geopolitical actor and learn [the language of power](#) only if it can discuss the most unpleasant of scenarios and think about the unthinkable. This is what reaching strategic maturity requires.

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