

Editorial

Our Common Security

President Putin's nuclear threats become more explicit: 'If someone decides to intervene in the ongoing events from the outside and create unacceptable strategic threats for us, they should know that our response to those oncoming blows will be swift, lightning fast,' he said in publicly broadcast remarks in St Petersburg in April 2022. 'We have the tools for this—ones that no one can brag about. And we won't brag. We will use them if needed. And I want everyone to know this. We have already taken all the decisions on this.' His political audience applauded.

Russia's criminal war on Ukraine has rapidly taken on the character of potential nuclear confrontation. In late February, shortly after Russia's extended invasion of Ukraine from the north, east and south, Putin publicly put Russia's 'deterrence' forces on special alert. He didn't use the word 'nuclear', but those are the weapons he's told them to prepare. In breaking the nuclear taboo, Putin exposes the duplicity of nuclear 'deterrence', which really means threatening mass death. In 1945, the United States twice visited mass death on Japan, and has refined its nuclear weapons practice ever since. When, in response to his recent threats, the French Foreign Minister reminded Putin that NATO is a nuclear-armed alliance, the threat of mass death was implicit in his few words.

Nor does the pretence that NATO is purely defensive and no threat to Russia help us to perceive clearly the acute danger we are in. Long ago, Putin absorbed the lessons of NATO's attack on Yugoslavia in 1999 and he is hyper sensitive to any perceived aggression, even while he orders Russia's military to mount its deadly and illegal assault on Ukraine. He publicly told President Macron that 'there would be no winners'. He publicly threatened anyone who interfered in Russia's war on Ukraine that they would suffer unprecedented consequences. Now he orders Russia's high command to actively participate in nuclear blackmail. NATO's Secretary-General decries such nuclear 'rhetoric', but who can be certain that Putin is bluffing? The fearful possibility is that Putin may be approaching the point where he decides he has nothing to lose by breaking the taboo and using some of Russia's many nuclear weapons. 'Deterrence' will have flipped.

Meanwhile, Putin's nuclear threats elicit some changes in US military operations. Scheduled testing of an intercontinental ballistic missile is postponed in case it disturbs the delicate balance of mutual threats of mass

death. Such caution is prudent when taboos on nuclear threats and possible use are broken. But, in one telling sign of long-term escalation, storage bunkers for nuclear weapons are to be upgraded at the US airbase at Lakenheath, some 25 miles from Cambridge in Eastern England, where the United States has recently deployed its state-of-the-art F35 *Lightning* aircraft.

As a nuclear-armed alliance, NATO is somewhat constrained in militarily assisting Ukraine in its hour of need. Stalled columns of Russian fighting vehicles presented easy targets from the air, but NATO did not dispatch its substantial air power against them for fear of engaging Russia directly and triggering Putin's nuclear arsenal, which includes many so-called 'tactical' warheads — 'deterrence' flips to 'escalate to de-escalate', as the expression goes in Russian nuclear military doctrine. Where does that end?

Echoing Presidents Gorbachev and Reagan speaking in 1985, the leaders of China, France, Russia, UK and USA jointly and publicly affirmed, in January 2022, that a nuclear war cannot be won and must never be fought. They reaffirmed the importance of addressing nuclear threats. What changed in a few weeks? How is it that such threats are repeated and nuclear weapons made ready for use?

We remind the five leaders of their recent pledge. Our common security is at stake. They are surely right that a nuclear war cannot be won. Nor must it ever be fought. We call on them to honour their joint commitment to prevent nuclear war and avoid arms races. In recent years, Russia, the United States and the United Kingdom have steadily lowered the 'threshold' to be crossed when ordering the use of nuclear weapons. They openly state that nuclear devices could be used in response to threatened non-nuclear attacks such as 'conventional', biological, chemical or cyber. Nuclear capabilities are closely integrated with 'conventional' force in current military doctrine. 'Useable' nuclear weapons, hypersonic missiles, artificial intelligence, armed drones and cyberwarfare are all part of the contemporary battlespace — including a nuclear one.

For the sake of humanity, Russia should cease its aggression and withdraw from Ukraine without delay. Millions of people in Russia, Ukraine and the wider world know that war is not the answer to Eurasia's common and enduring need for security. The work to build peace and security begins again. In doing so, it is timely to recall that, long ago, Bertrand Russell confronted humankind's peril from nuclear weapons and appealed 'as a human being to human beings: remember your humanity, and forget the rest'.

Tony Simpson