

Russia's Menacing Mix of Religion and Nuclear Weapons

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The first week of the Russian-Ukrainian war demonstrated that many of the estimates the West, Ukraine, and Russia had about one another's strategic intentions and capabilities were wrong. The way this devastating war is unfolding is beyond imagination.

As the conflict escalates, it could bring more miscalculations. The most catastrophic would be in the nuclear realm. The war already entered this realm when, on February 27, Russian President Vladimir Putin publicly ordered a "special mode of combat duty in the strategic deterrence forces." These forces include a nuclear triad of air, ground, and naval nuclear weapons; precision-guided long-range nonnuclear munitions; missile defense capabilities; and the command-and-control system that links them all.

Putin's declaration doesn't mean the world is experiencing a nuclear crisis. But it does indicate the world is on an escalatory path. A moment of maximum danger could arise if the Kremlin does something that Western leaders may not expect: blend nuclear threats with religious rhetoric. This outcome is not predetermined, but it is more likely than ever before. Since the Soviet Union's collapse, the role of the Russian Orthodox Church in Russian identity, domestic politics, and national security has grown immensely. Putin has introduced religious conservatism into Russia's national ideology and used religious analogies to discuss security issues. He has framed this war in historical, almost transcendental terms. And Russia's state-church nexus is most visible in the military—especially within the nuclear weapons complex.

If Putin uses religion to enhance nuclear coercion, his actions may start to resemble "madman theory," in which a leader acts somewhat irrationally in order to make his threats appear credible. If coercive signals that combine nuclear brandishing with messianic rhetoric start arriving from Moscow, it will be a brand-new experience for the world. The West will have even more trouble analyzing Putin and discerning his plans.

UP THE ANTE

Russia's strategic deterrence forces include nonnuclear and nuclear capabilities. Its doctrine includes making threats, as well as using advanced conventional munitions. These are the final warnings before the country begins to engage in nuclear coercion. By giving his order, Putin has moved the war from the pure conventional phase to the intermediate zone—closer to the nuclear sphere. For the first time in the post-Cold War era, a shooting war has acquired a deliberate nuclear dimension.

This is unprecedented, but predictable. The world should maintain a sense of proportion. In Russian military theory, nuclear coercion is organically interwoven into conventional operations. Nuclear signals aim to construct a protective zone around Russian troops on the battlefield to prevent reinforcements for Moscow's enemies. In the Ukrainian invasion, Russia has invoked its

nuclear arsenal to try to paralyze and scare away the West, creating optimal conditions for Russia's conventional forces. As Putin said in his prewar speech, states that interfere with Russia's operation will face consequences that they "have never seen in [their] entire history." Russia exercised its nuclear triad several days prior to Putin's speech to demonstrate the president's resolve and capabilities.

Although Putin's recent order is not a prelude to a nuclear strike, it is an unusual and major development. It is somewhat premature in the war, skipping over expected intermediate steps on the escalation ladder. According to its doctrine, Russia signals that it is considering going nuclear either when anticipating a nuclear attack or if its territorial integrity, sovereignty, and existence are endangered by conventional aggression. None of this has occurred. Whatever triggered the move—possibly a mix of frustration at the invasion's slow progress, surprise at the sanctions and Europe's pledge to arm Ukraine, and a desire to coerce Ukraine in negotiations—it appears to be improvised rather than preplanned.

From now on, if the situation demands it, Moscow will be forced to present more escalatory signals. It could withdraw from the Comprehensive Nuclear Test Ban Treaty and then conduct a nuclear test. It could deploy nuclear weapons to Belarus, Kazakhstan, or Syria—matching U.S. nuclear deployments beyond its national territory. It could also become the first ever country to use hypersonic weapons in a combat zone, for example in Syria, and then in Ukraine. It might follow this with a nuclear strike on an uninhabited location, before then actually using nuclear weapons on a target beyond Ukraine or on the battlefield.

NUCLEAR JIHAD

If Western establishments continue to dismiss Moscow's nuclear signaling, as they have done with Putin's recent order, Moscow may not only raise the stakes even higher. It may also add a religious, apocalyptic twist to its activity.

The world has entered the nuclear realm against the backdrop of a three-decades-old nexus between the Russian Orthodox Church, the country's defense establishment, and its nuclear forces—a phenomenon known as Russian nuclear orthodoxy. The latter is a metaphor for a widely circulating public belief, which Putin himself shares, that in order to preserve its traditional national values and Orthodox character, Russia needs to ensure it is a strong nuclear power (and vice versa). In 2007, for example, Putin publicly remarked that nuclear weapons and Orthodoxy are the two pillars of Russian statehood: the first the main guarantor of external security, and the second the principal source of the nation's moral-spiritual wellbeing. Not everyone in Russia's establishment has fully subscribed to this mystic notion. But Russia's defense elites have generally bought into a mix of nationalism, militarism, and conservative philosophy. Unsurprisingly, the Russian Orthodox clergy that work within the military have penetrated all levels of command within the nuclear triad and positioned themselves as a guardian of the state's strategic potential.

Putin's religious and philosophical views, meanwhile, have become integrated into his geopolitical vision and policy choices. The Kremlin occasionally offered messianic and religious framing for its war goals in Crimea and in Syria, and it literally parachuted clerics along with

troops into combat zones. There is a similar state-church nexus in the current war. Patriarch Kirill, the head of the Russian Orthodox Church, has sought to publicly distance himself from the operation. But the Kremlin frames the invasion as the liberation of Slavic brothers, and several days before the first bombs fell, the patriarch delivered a sermon on “the return of the prodigal son.” On the third day of war, he referred to the conflict in Ukraine and asked God to save the historical Russian lands—Belarus, Russia, and Ukraine—from internal enemies and the external forces of evil (without explicitly mentioning the operation). He also thanked the commander of the Airborne troops, an elite part of the Russian military currently fighting in Ukraine, on his 60th birthday, for contributing to Russian national security.

Putin sees himself as a historical figure, called upon by providence to protect the Russian civilization.

Putin, and many in his immediate entourage, risk losing everything in the Ukrainian operation. They cannot afford to be defeated. They are therefore unlikely to retreat and might be willing to climb very high on the escalation ladder, up to the nuclear stair. If the invasion goes awry, for example, they will seek to escalate so they can terminate the war on Russian terms, even if doing so requires unprecedented nuclear coercion. That means their threats might target both the West and Ukraine: the former to deter NATO from reinforcing the Ukrainian military, and the latter to make Kyiv accept a settlement if conventional means do not let Moscow impose its will. This will be in keeping with Russia’s theory of victory—scare enemies from intervening, dissuade them from arming Ukraine, and compel Kyiv to make peace.

Prior to the war, Moscow presumed that in any contest within its periphery, Russia’s adversaries would inherently perceive its nuclear threats as credible and back off because the balance of interests at stake favors Moscow. But now that both Russia and the West are more deeply involved, Russia may believe that conventional threats alone are insufficient. But by cultivating a reputation as a faith-driven actor, Russia could get the West to perceive it as mad, helping in wartime coercive bargaining.

If Putin promotes himself as a messianic strategic actor in the eyes of his competitors, and saturates nuclear threats with apocalyptic rhetoric, his coercion could be especially effective. Religious actors often come across as being undeterrable, enhancing the credibility of their threats. Putin has certainly played into this role. The Russian president made various messianic statements prior to this crisis, and he has framed the war as a clash between the forces of light and the forces of evil. Putin apparently sees himself as a historical figure, almost called upon by providence to protect Russian civilization. As a result, the West, which already questions his rationality, may now see him as unafraid of escalation.

But if Putin merges religious rhetoric and nuclear brandishing, it does not mean that he is insane. Instead, it is a unique combination of his genuine worldview coupled with practical considerations. Putin’s strategic, madman calculations and natural emotions can be mutually reinforcing. When cornered, frustrated, and concerned about his own survival, Russia’s president may become more messianic. At the same time, he may deliberately exploit an apocalyptic image to enhance coercion, especially if the West further escalates and the war in Ukraine does not go as planned. Religious statements that Russia’s military, defense officials, and politicians

have used in previous conflicts will help the Kremlin further leverage ambiguity and increase Western confusion.

RELIGIOUS SCHISMS

If the Kremlin tries to exploit the image of itself as a faith-driven actor, it may be destabilizing both externally and internally. No one has ever dealt with messianic nuclear signaling from a state. Analysts struggle to decipher a “regular” Putin; a “religious-nuclear” one will be even more puzzling. This could paralyze NATO and lead it to back off, paving the way for more conventional Russian escalation. It could also prompt NATO toward preemption, which would probably mean launching strikes designed to disarm Russia’s nuclear arsenal. Both options would lead to catastrophes, both for the Ukrainian people and for humankind.

Religious nuclear posturing could prompt internal instability as well. The more uncomfortable Russia’s elites, public, and military become with the losses, war aims, and their country’s own brutality, the higher the chances that Moscow resorts to reckless nuclear coercion to try and quickly win the conflict. But doing so will demand internal justification, and the resulting rhetoric is again likely to be messianic and religious.

This time, however, the rhetoric will be addressed at Russians. The question of military obedience, especially in the nuclear forces, will then become acute. The extraordinary nexus of church and military is deepest within the nuclear corps, but there is no way to determine whether the priests within the corps will enhance or inhibit stable command and control of the system. On the one hand, there are reasons to assume that it would lead to more obedience and commitment if an order—including to conduct a strike—arrives. It is not inconceivable, however, that the clergy would encourage nuclear operators to defy a directive. The civilian Russian ecclesiastical establishment is hierarchical but not monolithic, and the current war might further radicalize competing camps within the church, including its members within the nuclear community. Messianic nuclear signaling could be a double-edged sword. Putin’s nuclear brandishing might also catalyze internal instability should the governing elite and the military seek to remove the reckless president from power—and other groups from within the security establishment push back.

END TIMES

The world is on a risky path. Driven by a messianic self-perception, Putin is looking to correct what he sees as historical mistakes and increase Russian geopolitical power. He is unlikely to back down. Washington, in turn, seeks to contain and mercilessly punish him, sees any compromise as unacceptable appeasement, and is using this war to dissuade Beijing from being similarly assertive in Asia or elsewhere. These attitudes mean that Moscow and Washington are not leaving each other a way out. Instead, they continue to climb the escalation ladder as death, devastation, and tragedy mount in Ukraine. Adding a religious ingredient will further complicate matters.

Desperate times demand desperate measures. Despite what Russia, the United States, and Europe think about one another, this situation screams for an off-ramp. In the biggest Cold War nuclear

emergencies—the Cuban Missile Crisis in 1962, the Yom Kippur War in 1973, and the war scare in 1983—each side was able to come to a face-saving compromise. This time, it will be far more challenging; determined Russian leadership is deep into a shooting war, and the West stands firmly behind Ukraine. Given that no party is ready for an off-ramp, the urgency is especially immediate. Washington and Moscow must start considering what concessions they can make before the moment of maximum danger arrives. This does not mean they have to accept each other's worldviews, but it does mean they must de-escalate while there is still time.