

# SWP Comment

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## Russia's Catch-all Nuclear Rhetoric in Its War against Ukraine

**A balancing act between deterrence, dissuasion, and compellence strategies**

*Liviu Horovitz and Anna Clara Arndt*

**A close reading of Russia's nuclear statements and actions during the first seven months of its war against Ukraine reveals a threefold approach. Moscow is walking a fine line between a well-crafted and successful deterrence strategy to prevent foreign military intervention; a more modest and rather unsuccessful attempt at dissuading foreign aid to Ukraine and sanctions against Russia; and incremental nuclear coercion against Kyiv that spurred Western deterrence messaging in response. This analysis reveals a careful Russian approach, suggesting that cost-benefit calculations are likely to continue to render nuclear escalation unlikely. However, nuclear use cannot be fully discounted, particularly if war-related developments severely imperil the survival of Russia's regime.**

Seven months after Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, casual observers surmise that the Kremlin has been threatening to use nuclear weapons extensively and recklessly. Given both Moscow's rabid war fighting methods and its convoluted nuclear signaling, this perception is understandable — but nonetheless mistaken. On the basis of an extensive SWP chronology of nuclear interactions throughout the war, it is possible to conclude that Russian rhetoric has been carefully calibrated to deter foreign military intervention; dissuade foreign aid to Ukraine; and coerce the government in Kyiv.

### Russia's deterrence success

From February to September 2022, policy-makers in Moscow repeatedly stated that any clash between NATO and Russian forces would risk nuclear war. Hence, throughout the past seven months, most Russian nuclear narratives were geared towards deterring both democratic decisionmakers and the Western electorate from even considering a direct military intervention in Ukraine. Thus, Moscow primarily employed nuclear threats to create a sanctuary against foreign military involvement — a red line the West neither crossed, nor questioned. President Vladimir Putin laid the groundwork on February 24, the day of Russia's full-scale inva-

