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Could War in Ukraine Become Nuclear?

By Peter White
NASHVILLE, TN—The war in Ukraine is in its third month and shows no signs it will end soon. Meanwhile, United States, China, and Russia are in an arms race to be able to fight a conventional war and a nuclear one. What was unthinkable just a few years ago, is now the global strategy of the great powers and represents a sharp departure from the idea of “mutually assured destruction” that has underpinned arms control treaties for decades.

“Putin’s threat is unprecedented in the post-Cold War era—and unacceptable. There has been no instance in which a U.S. or a Russian leader has raised the alert level of their nuclear forces in the middle of a crisis in order to try to coerce the other side’s behavior,” said Daryl Kimball, Executive Director of the Arms Control Association (ACA).

Kimball said the risk of nuclear war is low but it is not zero. And he said that contrary to myth nuclear weapons don’t prevent major wars. They make aggression by nuclear-armed states easier and make wars waged by those states far more dangerous.

“We’ve been in a new world since at least 2018 when the U.S. Department of Defense announced a new strategic policy to guide the U.S. military and how it organized its forces and deployed its forces around the world,” said author and professor Michael Klare. He directs the Five College Program in Peace and World Security Studies at Hampshire College in Massachusetts.

Klare noted former Secretary of Defense James Mattis described the new strategy as “great power competition”. Mattis wrote that the era of the War on Terror has come to a close.

“That’s no longer the guiding philosophy—and has been replaced...by this new overarching vision that the US is now engaged in a long-term global competition with essentially two hostile powers, Russia and China, and that this will define U.S. military policy for the indefinite future,” Klare said.

He said this policy would require re-engineering the US military from fighting low- intensity conflicts, small scale wars in the Global South, mainly in Africa and the Middle East against terrorists and insurgents, and instead concentrate on fighting great powers or ‘near-peer powers’ that are close to the U.S. in their military capabilities.

Great Power Competition (GPC)



Although small in number, the military brass and the foreign policy elite who shape American power projection around the world want to build up U.S. forces in Europe and Asia, strengthen U.S. alliances, especially NATO, and a “proto-NATO” in Asia, called “the Quad”. It comprises four allied nations—United States, Japan, Australia, and India.

The war in Ukraine has a similarity with Taiwan because China considers it part of China just as Russia considers the Crimea and the Donbas part of the Russian Federation. Frustrating their ambitions is what GPC is all about. But it’s a strategy that has the risk of escalating conflict and igniting a broader war.

Although it’s not a proxy war per se’, Ukraine is nonetheless a testing ground for the new U.S. military strategy. Klare said the conventional weapons the US has been developing and deploying in Europe are intended to strike Russian military assets in Russian territory and to destroy its key military capabilities.

“Where conventional weapons could pose a strategic threat to Russia that might trigger the use of tactical nuclear weapons,” he said.

Western Military Aid to Ukraine
When the war started Ukraine’s military did not have the latest in conventional weapons but that is no longer the case.

So far, the U.S. has sent Ukraine some 50 million rounds of ammunition, according to Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS). The U.S. has also provided more than 1,400 Stingers, 5,000 Javelins, Puma and Switchblade drones, and more, according to a White House fact sheet.

Last Friday, President Joe Biden authorized the shipment of another \$150 million in military assistance for Ukraine for artillery rounds and radar systems in its fight against Russia’s invading forces. A U.S. official told the AP that the latest assistance includes 25,000 155mm artillery rounds, counter-artillery radars,

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jamming equipment, field equipment, and spare parts.

German Defense Minister Christine Lambrecht announced last Saturday that Germany will supply Ukraine with seven self-propelled armored howitzers and train Ukraine’s soldiers how to use them. The German artillery will expand the handful of howitzers that have also been pledged by the Netherlands. The long-range artillery can fire shells up to 40km. The howitzers are expected to be deployed in Ukraine by June.

Meanwhile, war in Ukraine has become a war of attrition. Its outcome could be determined by which side can resupply and redeploy its forces the fastest. Last week Russia pounded targets across Ukraine taking aim in the West at supply lines for foreign weapons and intensifying its offensive in Eastern Ukraine.

The Russian military said Wednesday it used sea- and air-launched precision guided missiles to destroy electric power facilities at five railway stations across Ukraine, while artillery and aircraft also struck troop strongholds and fuel and ammunition depots.

What Will Happen When it’s Over?
Klare predicted that the competition between the great powers would continue after the Ukraine War ends. He said we will have a new Cold War, except the “firebreak” between opposing forces in Europe will become much narrower and thus more fraught with danger.

“I think we’re going to see a sharp divide in Europe just as there was in the Cold War ... a new iron curtain as it were, except this line will lie much closer to Russia than the one during the Cold War,” Klare said.

As a result of the war, Finland is likely to join NATO that means the Russian-Finnish border will become a new battleground. Klare said the Baltic Republics and Poland are now on the front line. He said the extended front line would probably go from Belarus through somewhere in Ukraine depending on where the fighting ends and then into the Black Sea.

“So when the war ends these lines will be heavily fortified on both sides with advanced conventional weapons that are intended to strike deeply into enemy territory on each side, which makes the nuclear firebreak much narrower to become increasingly to disappear. So a conventional war will make more likely the use of these tactical nuclear weapons,” he said.