

WAR IN UKRAINE AND NUCLEAR THREAT

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The conflict between NATO and Russia over Ukraine poses the greatest risk of nuclear escalation since the fall of the Wall, and is even thought by some to be the greatest since World War II. Russia, specifically, since the beginning of the conflict placed its nuclear weapons under a "special service regime" (it would be the version of them in the framework of the "special military operation" that is carried out with the invasion of Ukraine). It seems clear that the initiative to use nuclear weapons would come from Russia, not from NATO. In June 2020, Vladimir Putin approved an update to the "Basic Principles of the State Policy of the Russian Federation on Nuclear Deterrence," in which he says "the Russian Federation regards nuclear weapons exclusively as a means of deterrence." But this principle defines four situations in which Russia could use nuclear weapons: the arrival of reliable data on the launch of ballistic missiles attacking the territory of the Russian Federation and/or its allies; use of nuclear weapons or other weapons of mass destruction by an adversary against the Russian Federation and/or its allies; adversary attack on critical government or military sites of the Russian Federation, the intervention of which would undermine the response actions of the nuclear forces; finally, aggression against the Russian Federation with the use of conventional weapons when the very existence of the Russian State is in danger.

The concept of existential risk becomes central to the use of nuclear weapons by Russia, because it includes an ingredient of subjectivity in its assessment. Shahar Avin, an Israeli researcher at the University of Cambridge, is probably the world's leading expert on linking the concepts of artificial intelligence and existential risk. He argues that the latter term consists of the risk of "catastrophic and irreversible loss", for example, as would occur if humanity became extinct. He points out that his studies are focused on the risks of human extinction and the collapse of global civilization. He adds that, by definition, "existential risks are unprecedented" and says that "we will not be here to study them if they have not already happened, but we can still study them rigorously by examining past and present catastrophes and collapses, studying the vulnerabilities of our global society or exploring the potential impacts of future

technologies that promise great power, but also great danger, such as artificial intelligence.”

It should be noted that on April 10, 40 days after the Russian invasion of Ukraine began, the Polish Deputy Prime Minister, Jaroslav Kuczynski, confided to the German press that "Warsaw is open to deploying nuclear weapons on its territory if necessary." He stressed that "if the White House asks us to keep those stockpiles here, there would be no problem because they would significantly strengthen our deterrent against the Kremlin." According to SIPRI, there are nine countries in the world that currently possess nuclear weapons, four of which are outside international supervision. Russia (6,257) and the United States (5,500) have them. Together, the two main nuclear powers concentrate more than 90% of the global total of these weapons systems. China (350), France (290) and the United Kingdom (225), the other three permanent members of the Security Council, follow, but a long way from the quantitative point of view. Pakistan (165) and India (156), which reached nuclear weapons outside the international supervision system, are two countries that have a perception of mutual threat.

Israel (90) is an undeclared nuclear power that resorts to nuclear weapons to compensate for the imbalance of forces it faces in the Middle East. North Korea would have between 40 and 50. It is a country that declares to have nuclear weapons, but that probably exaggerates the number and power of these. As for the West's response to the possible use of nuclear weapons by Russia, US experts on the subject maintain that the response will be "discipline and control." Should Putin decide to use the nuclear weapon, he would surely resort to ballistic missiles with limited range and high precision to hit the target. Cynical as it may seem, the use of such a weapon against Ukraine would not trigger an equivalent escalation of response from the United States and its allies. But the situation would be very different if the attack was suffered by a NATO country. In this case, there would be a corresponding answer. On April 20, Russia test-launched its RS-28 Sarmat nuclear missile, which would be the most powerful in its arsenal according to Putin. It would have a range of between 10,000 and 18,000 kilometers (it could fully reach the East Coast of the United States) and would have 10 warheads, each of which could be directed at different targets.

On June 13, SIPRI argued that the Russian-initiated war in Ukraine will escalate a nuclear arms race. It argues that Europe is experiencing the most unstable security situation since the Second World War. It says that the nine nuclear-weapon countries will increase and modernize their arsenals from 2022, which will continue during this decade in response to the surprise outbreak that the war in Ukraine implied for them. It argues that countries will be less discreet in referring to their nuclear weapons, a way of exercising armed diplomacy. But SIPRI does not advance on a key issue: the possibility of new countries joining the nine possessors of nuclear weapons. In the third week of June, Iran's relationship with the International Atomic Energy Association (IAEA) reached a critical point. It is that Tehran took concrete steps to become independent from the control of this international organization.

Iran is probably the country that has the highest chances -scientific and political- of becoming the tenth to have access to a nuclear weapon. If so, six countries with military nuclear capabilities will be in Asia, three in the West and one in Eurasia. The prevailing view in the West is that the worse Russia does in the war, the greater the risk that it will resort to nuclear weapons. On the contrary, their advances in the war would reduce that risk. It should be added that since the Russian invasion of Ukraine, North Korea has threatened to test new missiles capable of carrying nuclear payloads. Despite this, the nuclear risk does not seem to have had a central or priority place at the NATO Summit in Madrid.

In conclusion: since the beginning of the invasion of Ukraine, Putin has said that he does not rule out using nuclear weapons if circumstances require it. He specifically states that if the existence of the Russian State were at risk, in that case this type of weaponry would be used; the countries with nuclear weapons are nine, but between the United States and Russia they own more than 90% of the total. Finally, SIPRI maintains that the war in Ukraine raises the possibility of accelerating a career in the nuclear military field, at a time when Iran could take that path.