

Rudolf d’Avenna - 2 November 2022

## Confronting a New Phase in Russia’s Aggression

### Russia’s latest moves

With the ongoing mobilisation, the annexation of occupied Ukrainian territories, renewed nuclear sabre-rattling, and possible Russian responsibility for the sabotage of the North Stream pipelines, Russia has taken a series of co-ordinated and interconnected steps amounting to an escalation in its aggression against Ukraine. The Kremlin’s own propaganda has left behind the terminology of a “special military operation” and now, faced with risk of defeat directly endangering the regime, talks of “defending the motherland”. The links between the different strands of action are clear: only a threat to the homeland can justify a major mobilisation, which has proven very unpopular, leading to new protests and prompting the departure of a quarter of a million Russians eschewing conscription; and only the annexation enables Russia to frame any new Ukrainian offensive aiming at recovering occupied territories as an attack on Russia itself, which, in Russia’s own military doctrine, could justify the use of nuclear weapons.

Adding insult to injury, president Putin has called upon Ukraine to cease hostilities (while Russia continues hitting Ukrainian civilian targets far behind the frontline) and expressed readiness for negotiations, but excluded any compromise on the occupied territories. The message is addressed not so much to Kyiv and to the West as to the Global South, to peoples and countries which are suffering the secondary consequences of the invasion – famine, fuel price hikes, financial instability – and whose primary concern is an end to the war and a resumption of global economic recovery, in order to relieve the pressure they find themselves in. Putin wants to present himself and Russia as willing to make peace and portray Ukraine and its Western backers as war-mongers, and thus blame the West for the dire global consequences of the aggression.

### Context and motivation

Russia’s invasion of Ukraine has turned out to be a blunder in many ways: the initial plan to chase out the Ukrainian government and replace it with a puppet regime has failed; the Russian army has had to withdraw from all of northern Ukraine, and it is now under pressure in the east and south, including in territories it has held under the cover of local allies for half a decade; tens of thousands of Russian soldiers have died or have been wounded, and much equipment has been lost in messy retreats; instead of intimidating and dividing the West, the invasion has strengthened the resolve and unity of NATO, brought Finland and Sweden into the alliance, and triggered unprecedented Western military assistance to Ukraine. Furthermore, the ‘no limits’ partnership with China has become uncertain because the use of tactical nuclear weapons in Ukraine would represent a dangerous precedent for their use in the Indo-Pacific, which would be to China’s disadvantage. Also, the unexpected determination of the Ukrainians to fight for their country has rendered Russia’s declared ‘denazification of Ukraine’ utterly ridiculous.

In the light of these setbacks, the Kremlin has had to readjust its strategy and objectives and it is seemingly playing for time. Militarily on the back-foot and unable to bring a significant number of new recruits, trained and equipped, to the frontline before the onset of winter, the Kremlin is trying to hold on to the occupied territories by intimidating Ukraine and its Western backers and using flimsy legalistic justifications for the possible use of weapons of mass destruction (WMD).

In terms of domestic politics, president Putin desperately needs a victory, even a fictitious one. Repression in Russia has reached a level unseen since the end of the Soviet Union, and the mobilisation risks creating panic among ordinary Russians, who were not immediately affected by Western sanctions. Losing the war – which now, for the first time, seems

a distinct possibility – could spell the end of the regime in Moscow.

### Likely developments in the next three to six months

Ukraine has deployed an estimated 700,000 soldiers, and probably reached the limit in terms of voluntary mobilisation of motivated fighters. Western arms deliveries, combined with a strong Ukrainian determination, have allowed Kyiv to retake some of Ukraine's territories. Ukraine may have a narrow window of opportunity to push back on the battlefield before the Russian army is reinforced. This is particularly critical as the true scope of Russian mobilisation is unclear and may go well beyond the declared 300,000. Ukraine will therefore try hard to gain as much ground as possible before deteriorating weather conditions obstruct the movement of soldiers and heavy equipment. Ukraine is advancing into what Russia now considers Russian land, and the conflict is therefore entering uncharted and dangerous territory.

Depending on the speed and scale of Ukrainian advances, and on their impact on the Russian army, the current dynamics can lead to the following scenarios:

(a) a stalemate, if Russia holds the line before the arrival of reinforcements, possibly followed by a return to a war of attrition next year, or a 'frozen conflict', if both sides reach a level of exhaustion that would make a continuation of the war difficult;

(b) further escalation; or

(c) a defeat of the Russian army with inevitable repercussions for the regime in Moscow.

As always, such dynamics are volatile and there can be shifts between these scenarios at any time. At the same time, Russia will continue to use its communications strategy, and possibly hybrid warfare, in order to drive a wedge between the West and the Global South on the one hand, and to influence public opinion within the West with the aim of weakening the resolve to continue supporting Ukraine. The mounting socio-economic pressure due to inflation, and possible recession, provides fertile ground for such psyops.

### Major risks

Recent developments and the current threat scenarios represent the following risks for the EU, the transatlantic alliance, as well as for the multilateral system:

a) **Russia uses WMD or provokes a major nuclear accident, perhaps under a 'false flag' operation.**

The unfettered brutality deployed in the wars in Chechnya and Syria and now in Ukraine should leave no doubt about the Kremlin's willingness to destroy lives and livelihoods in the pursuit of its objectives. Russia will be careful to keep the use of WMD limited and manageable, and possibly under the radar of 'plausible deniability', so as not to alienate China or countries from the Global South which are either sympathetic to Russia or ambivalent, but also because the Kremlin calculates that the West will shy away from direct intervention, as was the case when chemical weapons were used in Syria.

b) Within the same logic, **the Kremlin will first and foremost use nuclear blackmail to intimidate Ukraine and its allies.** Such blackmail relies on two premises; first, that the other side believes Russia will use WMD if or when necessary, and second, that the Kremlin believes the West will not retaliate in kind.

c) **Russia 'sues for peace'** with a view to obtaining (some) international acceptance of the illegal annexations of Ukrainian territory. It would be a way of turning the tables and blaming Ukraine and the West for a continuation of the war, while diverting attention from the obvious responsibility of initiating it. Such a move could be seductive for those indifferent to, or ignorant of, the long-term consequences of successful aggression, notably the Global South or those in the industrialised West who are hardest hit by the socio-economic consequences of the war.

d) **Russia steps up hybrid warfare.** The sabotage of Nord Stream could portend further acts of hybrid warfare in order to aggravate Europe's energy crisis at the approach of winter, with the hope that it will divide public opinion and provoke a decline or rupture of military or financial support to Ukraine. Various hybrid actions, from sabotage of energy facilities, cyber crime, 'false flag' terrorist attacks on civilians or critical infrastructure, the unleashing of a new wave of migrants on Western Europe, or the development and release of new strands of COVID-19 could

be attempted to divert public attention from Russia's aggression and weaken the resolve to counter it.

e) In the longer run, if Russia gets away with the invasion and land grab in eastern and southern Ukraine, **the aggression could become an attractive precedent**. North Korea's change in its nuclear doctrine, Türkiye's eastern Mediterranean posturing, the resumption of hostilities between Armenia and Azerbaijan, border clashes between Kirgizstan and Tajikistan, and the flaring up of tensions between Kosovo and Serbia are all signs that the use of force, or the threat of force, is seen by some regional actors as an acceptable instrument of foreign policy. If Clausewitz' dictum of war as a continuation of politics by other means is, once again, taken literally, it will undermine and eventually destroy the post-World War II international order, which is based on the equal sovereignty and territorial integrity of states and the de-legitimization of wars of aggression.

### Response strategy

The EU and the transatlantic alliance have to **deal with all of these threats at the same time** and in a co-ordinated manner, as they are present in parallel and the Kremlin itself will use its escalation toolbox in an integrated manner. The West is faced with **two major dilemmas**:

1. The threat and possible use of WMD, which only leaves the uncomfortable options of either intervening militarily at the risk of major destruction and an escalation that may be difficult to manage; or to remain a passive witness to mass murder and hope to force Russia to back off by the indirect means of an economic embargo and international isolation. Giving in to nuclear blackmail now would have dire consequences – it would lead to repeated Russian threats and nuclear blackmail in the future, but also proliferation because if the threat works in Ukraine, it will work elsewhere, and various other countries will consider nuclear defence capacity as a necessity.
2. The inevitable and increasing trade-off between assisting Ukraine to defend itself against Russian aggression, perhaps for years to come, and mitigating

the global consequences of the triple crisis of food insecurity, surging energy prices, and financial instability unleashed by the combined and mutually reinforcing effects of COVID-19, climate change, and conflict (not only in Ukraine, but also in the Sahel, the Horn of Africa, Syria, Yemen and Afghanistan) on the other.

The elaboration of a comprehensive response strategy goes beyond the scope and purpose of this paper, but it could include the following elements:

- **Develop options for a prompt and proportionate military response to the possible Russian use of WMD**, and signal it to Russia as well as to the rest of the world; avoid ambiguity or setting 'red lines' that are not respected, both of which benefit the Kremlin. This would help to deal not only with a possible nuclear attack or accident, if or when it happens, but also with nuclear blackmail.
- **Stand firm on the non-recognition of the illegal annexations** (including of the Crimea) and maintain crippling sanctions against Russia as long as necessary. At the same time, continue lobbying with third countries for the defence of the basic UN principle of territorial integrity, without, in the words of European Council president Charles Michel, obliging them to "chose between East and West, or North and South".
- **Engage in long-term economic and financial planning to respond sustainably to the twin emergencies** of Russia's aggression against Ukraine and the triple crisis facing the Global South and the most vulnerable population groups in our own countries; communicate to the European public the wider goals and implications of competing demands and limited budgets.
- **Consider appropriate options of retaliation in case Russia steps up its hybrid warfare** against the EU and the transatlantic alliance.
- **Prepare for the long haul**. Russian aggression will not end any time soon, even if unfavourable seasonal weather imposes a temporary slow-down of battlefield activities. The EU will have to deal with a hostile eastern neighbour and with ambiguous relativism around the world for the foreseeable future.