



Nuclear Danger Remains in Ukraine Peace Settlement

By

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The Alaska summit between Presidents Donald Trump and Vladimir Putin on August 15, 2025, together with the follow-on meetings in Washington, DC, with Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy and European heads of state, focused additional attention on the need for a ceasefire and peace settlement of the war in Ukraine. The aftermath of this diplomacy left the status of future negotiations uncertain, despite the apparent urgency.

Russia continued its bombardment of Ukraine with drone and missile strikes, and the US weighed the possibility of additional economic sanctions on Russia, including secondary sanctions against states trading with Russia. Debates among the Washington cognoscenti about possible peace settlements focused on two “baskets” of topics: what kind of “land swap” might be agreeable to Ukraine and Russia and what sort of security guarantees would be necessary for a postwar Ukraine. Amid all of this, one elephant in the room received little attention: the status of nuclear weapons and nuclear deterrence in future relationships between Ukraine and Russia and between Russia and NATO.

President Donald Trump posted on social media in late July 2025, that Dmitri Medvedev, Russia’s former president, was a “failed former President of Russia” who had better “watch his words.” Trump was responding to earlier remarks by Medvedev, after Trump threatened economic sanctions against Russia unless Russian President Vladimir Putin agreed to a temporary ceasefire and expedited peace talks with Ukraine.

In the earlier exchange, Medvedev called Trump’s ultimatum about peace talks a threat and a step toward war. Most recently, Medvedev again warned against nuclear danger by referring to the American television series *The Walking Dead* and reminded Trump that Russia retains the Soviet “Dead Hand” system for automatic nuclear launch even under the most [extreme postattack conditions](#).

In response, President Trump posted on social media that he ordered two nuclear submarines to be repositioned in response to Medvedev’s threats. Trump said he ordered the submarines “to be positioned in the appropriate regions, just in case these foolish and inflammatory statements are more than just that.” In addition, the President [noted](#) that “[w]ords are very important and can often lead to unintended consequences. I hope this will not be one of those instances.”

Nuclear submarine movements are among the most highly classified information pertinent to military operations. If the reference was to American nuclear ballistic missile submarines (SSBN), this public announcement was unprecedented.

At one level, these interchanges between Medvedev and Trump are as much performative as they are substantive. During the early stages of Russia’s war against Ukraine beginning in February 2022, Putin issued frequent warnings about the possibility of Russian nuclear first use in response to actions taken by the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) that might be unacceptable to Russia. These warnings were dismissed by many Western political leaders and military experts as bluff to conceal Russia’s frustration at the prolonged military deadlock it faced in Ukraine, as well as distractions from looking too closely at Russia’s disappointing battlefield performances.



As Russia's military operations on the ground seemed to improve in 2024 and 2025, nuclear threats became less frequent and less explicit. At present, Russia seems confident of maximizing its forward progress in military reach and operational control over the Donbass and other districts in the east and south of Ukraine.

Even a "small" nuclear war fought with tactical nuclear weapons would be a self-defeating endeavor for Russia. Fighting a conventional war under the shadow of possible nuclear escalation is sufficiently risky. If Russia were to cross the bridge into nuclear first use there would be a strong likelihood of a NATO nuclear response.

Russians need to interrogate their own military literature from the Cold War with respect to the [challenge of conducting military operations](#) in a nuclear environment. Troops seeking an operational breakthrough against enemy defenses would be fighting against the prompt and delayed effects of nuclear detonations that slow operational movement, inflict significant numbers of casualties, and corrupt the coordination and cohesion of combined arms. The Soviet Union could draw upon its ideological indoctrination and favorable memories of its victory in the Great Patriotic War (World War II) to maintain morale and avoid mass desertion, Russia cannot.

Nor would the economy of Europe, including Russia, survive anything beyond the very restrictive use of a few ultra-low-yield or low-yield in the sub-five kiloton range. In today's world of social media and globally transmitted visual images, the meltdown of major financial and other institutions in Europe would trigger a global crash of markets, disrupt supply chains, let loose armed formations of criminals, and drive many leading politicians to abdication. Some in NATO might hope that Putin's mistaken decision for nuclear first use would finally convince Russia's military and security forces to overthrow their president and sue for peace, but Putin is not Lenin, and he is as likely to double down on escalation as he is to acquiesce to a nuclear ceasefire.

And therein lies the second danger, escalation to strategic nuclear war between the United States and Russia. Putin might calculate that he could hive off the nuclear deterrents of the British and French from their American allies and bully the former into submission while frightening the American government and public with separate threats of mass destruction. This would be a dangerous miscalculation because the nuclear forces of the United States are politically and operationally coupled to those of their European allies.

American nuclear weapons and American personnel deployed in Europe are effectively tied to the continent under Article V of the NATO charter. The idea that selective use of tactical nuclear weapons in Europe by Russia could be sealed off from wider and more deadly destruction, is beyond optimism.

In addition to misplaced optimism about escalation control during a major European war, there is also a lack of appreciation for the challenge of skillful crisis management that might avoid war altogether. Experience teaches that the requirements for nuclear and other crisis management include shared understandings and expectations about the risks of war and a willingness to consider the danger of misperceptions held by leaders in stressful situations. They may misjudge other national leaders as irrevocably committed to acts of conquest or aggression, when in fact those other heads of state may be undecided about their final judgments for or against war.

Communication between and among leaders may be incomplete and intelligence assessments can be blinkered by insufficient information or political bias. Examples of these and other maladies in crisis are provided by the July crisis of 1914 leading to the outbreak of World War I, the Cuban missile crisis of 1962, and by numerous other crises.



Russians playing with the rhetoric of Armageddon are legitimizing nuclear coercion in a time of troubles. The arrangement of a prompt ceasefire and peace agreement between Ukraine and Russia is of the highest significance for many reasons. These include putting an end to the loss of life and the destruction of national infrastructure. This objective should be pursued with aggressive diplomacy and without the distraction of references to the possibility of a war that would have no precedent in its capacity to do irreparable harm to civilization.

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