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## Why a Diplomatic Solution to the Ukraine War is Getting More and More Elusive



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Wars that do not end tend to escalate and spread. This is the message of the missile blast in Poland that killed two people, regardless of whether or not the missile was Ukrainian or Russian.

“From the information that we and our allies have, it was an S-300 rocket made in the Soviet Union, an old rocket and there is no evidence that it was launched by the Russian side,” Polish President Andrzej Duda said on Wednesday. “It is highly probable that it was fired by Ukrainian anti-aircraft defence.”

A fresh crisis over the Ukraine war may have been averted, but other crises will recur as the war continues with no sign of it ending. The alacrity with which presidents and prime

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ministers attending the G20 summit in Bali jumped out of bed in the middle of the night to confer about an explosion in a village in east Poland shows how fearful they are that the war will spread.

They are right to be worried, yet escalation will be difficult to stop because it happens automatically in any war as each side seeks out the enemy's weak points at home and abroad.

Ukraine succeeded in blowing up the Kerch Bridge linking the Russian mainland to Crimea. Russia responded by launching six major missile and drone barrages since October against Ukraine's infrastructure, primarily targeting its electricity generating capacity.

The humiliating retreat of Russian forces from Kherson city is presumably what led Moscow to retaliate by firing 100 missiles and 10 attack drones at key components of the Ukrainian infrastructure on Tuesday. It was the most intense missile assault since the Russian invasion began nine months ago, according to Ukraine. Already prolonged blackouts have become the norm and, despite repairs, this situation will get worse this winter since large fixed targets like electricity power facilities are easy to target, difficult to defend, and take time to repair.

Russia is reportedly not directly attacking nuclear power stations in the west of Ukraine which provide much of the electricity, but it is hitting the high voltage cables and substations which they use to feed electric power to the grid. A danger is that the cooling system or other equipment essential to the safe operating of a nuclear plant will be hit.

As for now, some 40 per cent of the electric infrastructure has been damaged according to the Ukrainian authorities. In the western city of Lviv there is no hot water and in Kryvyi Rih in central Ukraine 100 miners were trapped underground by a power failure and had to be manually winched to the surface.

Any war risks getting out of hand as each side tries to give their enemies a nasty surprise and attack where they least expect it. International concern has understandably focused on the risk of the Ukraine war precipitating the use by Russia of tactical nuclear weapons on the battlefield. President Vladimir Putin periodically goes in for nuclear sabre rattling and President Joe Biden brought this up in a meeting this week with Chinese President Xi Jinping. Russia sees this potential threat as a useful pressure point on the Nato powers and on the rest of the world.

But fear of Mutual Assured Destruction is still a powerful restraint on the actual use of nuclear devices. It is also unclear how limited tactical nuclear warfare would improve the

Russian position in Ukraine, unless it was to fend off a decisive defeat – and even then it would be a gamble.

In reality, the threatened nuclear warfare is probably not the most likely kind of escalation in Ukraine. Terrifying though the prospect of their use may be, they are a very blunt and old-fashioned instrument whose use may prove politically counter-productive. Modern warfare, as shown in recent conflicts in the Middle East, involves the less risky use of precisely targeted missiles and drones which are no longer a monopoly of the US, as they were in the 1990s. Russia is using them against Ukraine today, but there is no reason why Ukraine should not respond in kind and attack the Russian infrastructure.

Ukraine has won important victories in the land war in the last few months at Kharkiv and Kherson, but none of these were decisive defeats for Russia. Putin apparently still believes that Russia has the advantage in a long war with Ukraine because it is the largest country. Moreover, he does not have much choice but to play double or quits because his self-destructive escapade in Ukraine has so far produced nothing but a string of defeats.

There have been more calls for a diplomatic solution to the war in recent weeks. But it is difficult to see this happening when both sides believe they can still make gains on the battlefield and have no option but to go on. The Ukrainian army will not want a ceasefire which would allow the Russian military to reorganise and reinforce. Putin, who started the war to re-establish Russia as a super-power, cannot admit that he has degraded its status even further by his folly.

*Patrick Cockburn is the author of [War in the Age of Trump](#) (Verso).*

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