ISSN 3034-8218

STUDI INTERNAZIONALI

Mutual Assured Destruction in the 21st Century: Relevance in the Russo-Ukraine Conflict

di Alice Bignotti

In an age of changing allies, renewed competition, and new technologies, nuclear war has again become a frightening possibility. Evidence of the ongoing importance of nuclear weapons in maintaining global stability is the fact that countries have significantly increased spending on nuclear weapons, with a record surge of 13% in 2023 (Sabbagh & Defence, 2024). The ongoing Russo-Ukraine conflict has demonstrated how perilously close we are to nuclear war and serves as a powerful reminder of the delicate balance underpinning international relations today. Mutual Assured Destruction (MAD), once an emblem of Cold War deterrence, has thus remerged as a critical and defining principle in contemporary geopolitics. This article explores the contemporary relevance and necessity of MAD, revealing its deeper impact on strategic calculations and the delicate balance it creates among major powers.

The Logic of MAD

MAD emerged during the Cold War; a "bipolar era" when the US and the Soviet Union dominated global affairs. MAD contributes to strategic stability by creating a balance of power wherein the risks of initiating a nuclear conflict outweigh any potential benefits for rational actors. Decision-makers thus recognise the need to avoid actions that could trigger a nuclear exchange and seek to de-escalate crises through diplomatic means and communication channels. MAD, therefore, discourages the use of nuclear weapons and helps prevent major conflicts between nuclear-armed states, potentially sparked by regional disputes and tensions. MAD is based on the assumption that all the actors involved behave rationally, understanding that a possible nuclear escalation would result in their own annihilation. This reliance on rationality does not consider the potentially irrational decisions that leaders could make due to mental instability or circumstances of extreme stress; therefore, an irrational leader could theoretically order the launch of nuclear weapons without considering the cata-strophic consequences. Nonetheless, it is important to understand that nuclear launch protocols are complex and involve multiple layers of authorisation (Jackson, 2021). In most cases, leaders do not have the unilateral ability to launch a nuclear attack at will; they must go through a chain of command. This process prevents unilateral and irrational decisions that could lead to a nuclear escalation. Furthermore, in the scenario where an irrational leader has the authority to initiate a nuclear attack, the risk of deployment would be reduced by military and political officials involved in the process, who most likely would disobey such an order if it clearly posed an existential threat without justification (Cohn, 2017). This system is fundamental to maintaining strategic stability, even if the assumption of rationality is compromised.

Russia and Ukraine

Today, the distribution of power has shifted; the world is more multipolar, with numerous major powers possessing significant military, economic, and diplomatic capabilities, often pursuing their own interests independently (Straub, 2019). The multipolar system has led to a more complex and dynamic international environment, with shifting alliances, competition and potential for conflict among various power centres. The logic of MAD, however, continues to

ISSN 3034-8218

shape crisis management strategies and conflict resolution efforts, particularly in situations of heightened tension or conflict escalation such as the war in Ukraine (Bennett, 2023). Many have questioned why Western countries have yet to get directly involved in the war in Ukraine, especially as Ukraine has expressed a desire to have NATO troops on the ground (Pazzanese, 2024). However, after French President Macron raised the possibility of deploying troops in Ukraine, Putin threatened the use of nuclear weapons and "the destruction of civilisation" (Putin, 2024). Indeed, since the beginning of the conflict, Putin has repeatedly threatened the use of nuclear weapons in Ukraine and reminded the world that Russia has the world's largest nuclear arsenal and more tactical nuclear weapons than the West combined (Mirovalev, 2024). The threat of nuclear escalation, therefore, has influenced the West's decision not to deploy troops on the ground. Putin's red line, therefore, seems to be the deployment of NATO's troops on the ground in Ukraine; if West-ern countries continue to respect that, a Russian nu-clear response seems unlikely (Freedman, 2023). However, if we look closely at Putin's "red lines", we see that they have changed over time in response to what Ukraine does and how the West reacts. For instance, Ukraine using drones to attack Moscow was once seen by the West as a tactic that might make Russia use nuclear weapons. Yet, over time, such actions have become increasingly commonplace, indicating a recalibration of perceived red lines (Boot, 2023). Similarly, Ukrainian forces re-gained control of Kherson just six weeks after Putin said it was part of Russia and a "red line", thus showing that these red lines are not set in stone (Gould-Davies, 2023). In this context, the observed alterations to Putin's red lines highlight the fundamental tenet of MAD, which persists and prevails precisely because all asserted thresholds have yielded to the greatest imperative of nuclear deterrence. On the other hand, countries close to Russia have expressed their concern about a possible Nuclear attack; China has consistently opposed the use of nuclear weapons in Ukraine and asked for the demilitarisation and de-occupation of the Zaporizhzhia Nuclear Power Plant to guarantee nuclear security (Seddon, 2023). Therefore, in the context of the conflict in Ukraine, MAD still plays a fundamental role in avoiding nuclear escalation. Both Russia and Ukraine assess the risks and potential consequences of their actions, including the possibility of escalation through the prism of MAD. In the same way, as tensions between the West and Russia increase, the principle of deterrence influences how major powers navigate the crisis and try to affect the outcome of the conflict through diplomatic and eco-nomic means instead of deploying troops in Ukraine.

Putin's Last Act?

The shifting nature of Putin's red lines in response to actions by Ukraine and Western counterparts is compelling evidence of the enduring efficacy of MAD as the ultimate determinant of strategic be-haviour. In this context, the observed alterations to Putin's red lines underscore the fundamental tenet of MAD, which persists and prevails precisely because all asserted thresholds have yielded to the greatest imperative of nuclear deterrence, particularly in the face of NATO's and Ukraine's collective actions and policies. Nonetheless, one of the complications within the argument could be Russia's reaction to the potential defeat in battle. It is argued that in the event of impending military defeat, Putin would choose the use of nuclear weapons rather than lose, as a defeat in Ukraine could result in his overthrow (Freedman, 2023). Nonetheless, even in a potential defeat for Russia, the possibility of expanding the conflict by using nuclear weapons would still be dangerous and self-defeating for Putin, as it pos-es not only immediate and catastrophic risks to the targeted region but also the possibility of a nuclear response by Western countries; as NATO's Secretary General Stoltenberg underlined (Stoltenberg, 2022). In addition, a nuclear attack would alienate Russia from the international community, jeopardizing strategic alliances and economic partnerships, particularly with China. In such a scenario, the principle of MAD remains a critical factor in preventing nuclear escalation. The fear of mutual annihilation thus remains a deterrent, making Russia and Ukraine carefully evaluate the consequences of their actions.

MAD: Essential for Promoting Global Stability

The renewed emphasis on nuclear capabilities evident today, reaffirms the notion that the balance of power, ensured by the threat of MAD, remains a fundamental principle in preventing large-scale conflicts. By ensuring that any nuclear aggression would result in devastating retaliation, MAD continues to dissuade nations from engaging in actions that could escalate into full-scale nuclear war. Even in a shifting geopolitical landscape characterised by emerging nuclear powers and technological advancements, MAD significantly influences international relations (Bennett, 2023). Despite its origins in the Cold War, MAD has proven timeless, continuing to guide the

ISSN 3034-8218

nuclear strategies of major powers such as the United States, Russia, and China. The belief in the ability to inflict unacceptable damage on an adversary serves as a cornerstone of their deterrence posture, influencing defence planning, force posture, and nu-clear weapons modernisation efforts (Mafasumi, 2024, pp. 25-27 & 58-65). MAD thus remains a vital framework for understanding and managing the complexities of global security dynamics, both during the Cold War and today. The conflict in Ukraine vividly demonstrates MAD's ongoing relevance, as the shadow of nuclear catastrophe forces nations to carefully consider their actions. Even in the face of war, the logic of MAD sets limits that prevent conflicts from spiralling into a nuclear disaster. As global security landscapes evolve, the principles of MAD remain essential, not only for preventing nuclear proliferation but for reinforcing the precarious balance that sustains peace.

ISSN 3034-8218

Bibliografia

Bennett, B. W. (2023, November 27). "Deterrence of North Korean Limited Nuclear Attacks." rand.org. https://www.rand.org/pubs/commentary/2023/11/deterrence-of-north-korean-limited-nuclear-attacks.html.

Boot, Max. (2023, August 29). "Opinion | Ukraine Is Crossing Russia's "Red Lines" with Impunity. It is a Lesson for Biden." Washington Post, www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2023/08/28/ukraine-russia-red-lines-putin-biden/. [Accessed 16 Apr. 2024].

Cohn, M. (2017, November 25). The Duty to Disobey a Nuclear Launch Order. Truthout. https://truthout.org/articles/the-duty-to-disobey-a-nuclear-launch-order/. [Accessed 04 July 2024].

Freedman, Lawrence. (2023, December 11). "The Russo-Ukrainian War and the Durability of Deterrence." IISS, www.iiss.org/online-analysis/survival-online/2023/12/the-russo-ukrainian-war-and-the-durability-of-deterrence/. [Accessed 14 Apr. 2024].

Gould-Davies, Nigel. (2023, January 1). "Opinion | Putin Has No Red Lines." The New York Times, www.nytimes.com/2023/01/01/opinion/putin-russia-ukraine-war-strategy.html. [Accessed 14 Apr. 2024].

ICAN. (2024). NATO escalates nuclear tensions with Russia. [online] Available at: https://www.icanw.org/nato_escalates_nuclear_tensions_with_russia. [Accessed 7 Nov. 2024].

Iida, Mafasumi, et al. NIDS China Security Report 2024. (2024). "China, Russia, and the United States Striving for a New International Order." (pp. 25-27; 58-65).

Jackson Jr., W. E. (2021). The Military Role in Nuclear Command and Control | Arms Control Association. Armscontrol.org. https://www.armscontrol.org/act/2021-12/arms-control-today/military-role-nuclear-command-and-control. [Accessed 04 July 2024].

Mirovalev, Mansur. (2024, March 1). "After Macron Touted Troops to Ukraine, Putin Warns West of Nuclear War Risk." Al Jazeera, www.aljazeera.com/news/2024/3/1/how-real-is-putins-threat-to-nuke-the-west. [Accessed 14 Apr. 2024].

Pazzanese, C. (2024, May 14). "Should NATO step up role in Russia-Ukraine war?" Harvard Gazette. https://news.harvard.edu/gazette/story/2024/05/should-nato-step-up-role-in-russia-ukraine-war/. [Accessed 19 Jun. 2024].

Sabbagh, D., Defence, D. S., & editor, security. (2024, June 17). "Global spending on nuclear weapons up 13% in record rise." The Guardian. https://www.theguardian.com/world/article/2024/jun/17/global-spending-on-nuclear-weapons-up-13-in-record-rise. [Accessed 25 June 2024].

Seddon, Max, et al. (2023, July 5). "Xi Jinping Warned Vladimir Putin against Nuclear Attack in Ukraine." Financial Times, www.ft.com/content/c5ce76df-9b1b-4dfc-a619-07da1d40cbd3. [Accessed 15 Apr. 2024].

Straub, Jeremy. (2019, November 19). "Mutual Assured Destruction in Information, Influence and Cyber Warfare: Comparing, Contrasting and Combining Relevant Scenarios." Technology in Society, vol. 59, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.techsoc.2019.101177.

U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission. (2022, October 27). "China's Position on Russia's Invasion of Ukraine." www.uscc.gov, www.uscc.gov/research/chinas-position-russias-invasion-ukraine. [Accessed 13 Apr. 2024].

Walz, Kenneth. (1981). "The Spread of Nuclear Weapons: More May Better." Adelphi Papers, vol. 171.

.