



Photo: Presidents Putin and Xi, June 5, 2019, from the Presidential Press and Information Office of the Kremlin, [here](#).

IMPLICATIONS OF RUSSIA’S NUCLEAR SIGNALING DURING THE UKRAINE WAR FOR CHINA’S NUCLEAR POLICY

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Abstract

In this Policy Forum essay, Tong Zhao argues that China fundamentally sees the Ukraine conflict as being caused by hegemonic behavior by the US-led West forcing Russia’s hand. China has been watching and learning from Russia’s implicit use of nuclear threat, and the lessons learned may add further ambiguity and uncertainty to the interpretation and application of China’s No First Nuclear Use policy in potential conflict situations, including those involving Taiwan.

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used in the region by developing better understandings of the processes that could lead to the first use of nuclear weapons and the potential outcomes of such nuclear weapons use. In the first year of this three-year project, the NU-NEA project team identified over 25 plausible nuclear weapons “use cases” that could start in Northeast Asia, sometimes leading to broader conflict beyond the region. These nuclear use cases are described in the report [*Possible Nuclear Use Cases in Northeast Asia: Implications for Reducing Nuclear Risk*](#). The project has commissioned five contributions to update the cases in light of the Ukraine conflict, of which this essay is the second.

Keywords: United States, Nuclear Strategy, Nuclear Use, Northeast Asia, China, Russia, Ukraine

China sees the Ukraine war as ultimately caused by the hegemonic policies of a U.S.-led group of Western countries, against which Russia was forced into taking action. As Beijing watched the war unfolding, it has concluded that the West's crippling economic sanctions against Russia, and its political condemnation and diplomatic isolation of Russia, reflect the West's intent to use the opportunity of the war to comprehensively weaken Russia and to advance the geostrategic interests of the Western countries, and especially of the United States. As a result, China's strategic concern regarding the United States and the U.S.-led Western countries has significantly increased. This further strengthens the Chinese belief that it must build up its comprehensive military power, and its strategic deterrent capabilities in particular, to address growing threats from the West.

Because of 'such interpretation of the nature of the Ukraine war and of its underlying driving forces, Beijing has adopted a sympathetic view toward Russia's nuclear saber-rattling. It is not as worried as many Western countries about the risk of deliberate Russian nuclear escalation because it believes that Putin simply wants to use nuclear signaling—that is, signaling by rhetoric and/or actions involving some aspect of nuclear operations that nuclear weapons might be used against adversaries—as a tool to delay and reduce Western intervention in the Ukraine war, including to discourage Western military support to Ukraine and to lessen economic and political pressure on Russia.

According to the mainstream Chinese view, Russian nuclear signaling has largely worked. Putin's nuclear signaling did make Western countries more cautious in providing military support to Ukraine and has been considered in debates on imposing crippling sanctions on Russia that may lead to regime instability. Chinese strategists have been closely watching the Russian practice of sending various nuclear signals and will likely incorporate some of Russia's tactics into future Chinese nuclear signaling strategy, as Beijing has been referencing and learning from Moscow's nuclear development and employment strategies for decades.

To Chinese observers, Russia achieved the coercive benefits of nuclear signaling without issuing an explicit threat to use nuclear weapons. None of the Russian signaling activities, including nuclear exercises, testing of nuclear-capable delivery systems, declaring the step to a higher alert status for its nuclear forces, and mentioning nuclear weapons in senior officials' public statements, were overtly manifested in the form of an unambiguous threat of using nuclear weapons against a specific enemy. This observation is likely to enhance China's appreciation that a country can achieve the coercive leverage of nuclear weapons without crossing the threshold of explicitly threatening nuclear use. Short of an unambiguous nuclear threat, there are many things a country can do or say to refer to nuclear weapons and implicitly threaten their use.

This Chinese thinking on nuclear signaling could add further ambiguity and uncertainty to the interpretation and application of China's No First Use (NFU) policy. The NFU policy prohibits the first use of nuclear weapons by China but not the threat of first use of nuclear weapons in a conventional war, thus leaving “wobble room” for China to maximize the coercive leverage of nuclear weapons without violating the letter of its NFU pledge. According to international scholars who have had access to authoritative Chinese military texts such as the *Science of Second Artillery Campaigns* written in the mid-2000s, the authors of those texts and those senior military officials who approved the texts already had the view at that time that to threaten nuclear use in a conventional war would not contradict China's NFU policy.¹ Recent Russian signaling practices during the Ukraine war are likely to encourage further thinking in this direction. Changes in how China views the utility of threatening to use nuclear weapons could undercut the reassuring value of the NFU policy and incentivize China to make more use of flexible nuclear signaling to capitalize the coercive leverage of nuclear weapons in future conventional conflicts, including in the Taiwan Strait. In this sense, the line between threat and non-threat of nuclear use will likely become blurrier.

In addition to the implicit indulgence of threatening first use of nuclear weapons, both the *Science of Second Artillery Campaigns* and writings by a former deputy commander of the Second Artillery were found by international scholars to include the operational concept of “Lowering the Nuclear Coercion Threshold”, which indicates that China gives itself the option to change its nuclear policy as announced in peacetime and to adopt, or make the appearance of adopting—a lower nuclear use threshold in a time of crisis if necessary.² That China may be prepared to change its nuclear use policy during crises is not a surprise, as the international community also watched Putin make a general nuclear threat during his recent announcement of partial mobilization in Russia. The broad conditions under which Putin now threatens possible nuclear weapons use go beyond the relatively narrow conditions specified in Russia's official nuclear declaratory policy. Putin has indicated that he could potentially use nuclear weapons in response to any threat to Russia's territorial integrity, whereas the Russian official policy only allows nuclear use when Russia faces an “existential threat” as a country in a conventional war. The impression that top leaders can change their official nuclear policy at will during crises will likely undermine any remaining confidence that nuclear armed states have toward each other's peacetime nuclear declaratory policy. This will make diplomatic efforts to reassure one's rivals and build stable

¹ See, for example, an English translation of an excerpt of from Yu, Jin, ed., *Dierpaobing zhanyixue* [The Science of Second Artillery Operations] (Beijing: People's Liberation Army Press, 2004), 294–96, translated by Gregory Kulacki, Union of Concerned Scientists, September 19, 2014, <https://www.ucsusa.org/sites/default/files/attach/2014/09/Kulacki-Translation%20of%20Coercion%20section%209-22-14.pdf>

² Zhao Xijun, *Detering War: Discussing Missile Deterrent* (Beijing: National Defense University Press, 2003), 34, mentioned in Thomas Christensen, “The Meaning of the Nuclear Evolution: China's Strategic Modernization and US-China Security Relations,” *Journal of Strategic Studies*, 35, no. 4 (2012): 479.

nuclear relations more difficult, including Chinese efforts to promote NFU with other Nuclear Weapons States.

Going forward, the Russian attempt to use nuclear threat to secure as a *fait accompli* and to consolidate the annexation of newly occupied territories in Ukraine will influence China's thinking of the role of nuclear weapons in helping achieve unification with Taiwan. How Russia's exploitation of nuclear escalation risk to hold Ukrainian territory may specifically affect Chinese thinking will depend on how successful or disastrous the Russian attempt to secure those territories eventually proves to be.