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Might Russia use its ?tactical? nukes

by GWYNNE DYER

On 25 August the president of Belarus, Alexander Lukashenko, announced that the country's combat aircraft have been ?upgraded' by the Russians to carry nuclear weapons, and Belarusian pilots are being trained to deliver them. It got a single paragraph, or no notice at all, on most news sites. Nobody panicked.

That's partly because nobody is afraid of the Belarusian air force, and nobody believes that the Russians would really give Lukashenko nuclear weapons. It's also partly because everybody has got used to Moscow reminding us every three or four weeks that it might use tactical nuclear weapons in Ukraine if it gets really cross.

Russian President Vladimir Putin started hinting heavily that he might use nuclear weapons if other countries intervened to prevent his conquest of Ukraine on the very first day of the war. ?The consequences will be such as you have never seen in your entire history,? he warned on 24 February.

That sounded like Putin was actually threatening to use his long-range, city-killing nukes on NATO countries if they intervened. After that opening fanfare, however, the threats from Russian official sourcess were dialed back to occasional reminders that Moscow might use much smaller ?tactical' nukes on the eastern battlefields in Ukraine.

The talk-show super-patriots on Rossia-1(state television) went on fantasising about World War Three in full costume dress ? ?Why do we need a world if Russia is not in it?? as presenter Dmitri Kiselyov put it ? but the military professionals had presumably pointed out to the regime that threatening Armageddon would alarm even Russia's friends (like China).

So the official references by Russian sources to possible nuclear use in Ukraine became more indirect and less frequent, particularly after Russian abandoned its failed attempt to seize Kyiv and the Russian offensive in eastern Ukraine began making slow but steady progress. Even for Russians, nuclear use is a counsel of despair.

But now the Russian offensive in the east has fully stalled, and the perceived stalemate has put the question of tactical nuclear weapons back on the table. To be fair, the renewed chatter about the Russian use of mini-nukes is now coming more from pundits in the Western media than from Russia sources, but the concern is genuine.

Even one tactical nuke could open up a hole in Ukrainian lines that Russian forces could pour through. The Russians would also hope that it would terrify the NATO countries into abandoning their support for Ukraine. On the other hand, it might escalate the conflict into a full-on nuclear war between Russia and the NATO countries.

Both sides will have war-gamed this to death, trying out the various possible moves and counter-moves once a single low-yield Russian nuclear weapon has been used on the Ukrainian front line. (Even Putin would not nuke a city, or launch a full strike on all of Ukraine. This would be ?robust signalling', not an overture to worldwide nuclear holocaust.)

The likelihood that the Russians would actually choose to go down this road is currently quite low, but it is not zero. There is no genuine Russian national interest at stake here, but the careers of Vladimir Putin and his closest associates certainly are at risk. For them military defeat, or even a prolonged and costly stalemate, spells political ruin.

Many of them would just flee abroad and live with their money if the Ukrainian invasion fails and the regime collapses, but for Putin himself this seems to be a heritage issue. He feels the hand of history on his shoulder, and he has come to see himself as an historical figure on the scale of Catherine the Great or Peter the Great.

Putin is probably not thinking of ordering a single nuclear strike on Ukraine at the moment, for the military stalemate is still young

and he clearly believes he still has cards to play. But if those cards don't work and the Russian military and political situation deteriorates, he might be tempted. What should NATO do if he gives in to the temptation?

The best NATO response would be to do nothing nuclear at all. Just announce that any further nuclear weapons use, or any attempt by Russian troops to advance through the gap that the single strike opened in Ukraine's defences, will be met by the full deployment of NATO's conventional air power over Ukraine.

Is this what NATO's war-gamers have concluded? I don't know, but both sides will have been gaming out every possible response to the explosion of a single Russian tactical nuclear weapon in eastern Ukraine. Let us hope that this is what the NATO groups have decided ? and that they have also communicated their decision to the Russians.

To shorten to 700 words, omit paragraph 11. (?Many...Great?)