

Playing with Fire

Ukraine's Operation Spiderweb has crossed the threshold when it comes to triggering a Russian nuclear response. How Russia and the United States respond could determine the fate of the world.

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In 2012, Russian President Vladimir Putin declared that “The nuclear weapons remain the most important guarantee of Russia’s sovereignty and territorial integrity and play a key role in maintaining the regional balance and stability.”

In the intervening years, western analysts and observers have accused Russia and its leadership of irresponsibly invoking the threat of nuclear weapons as a means of “saber rattling”—a strategic bluff to hide operational and tactical shortfalls in Russian military capabilities.

In 2020 Russia published, for the first time, an unclassified version of its nuclear doctrine. The document, called “Basic Principles of State Policy of the Russian

Federation on Nuclear Deterrence,” noted that Russia “reserves the right to use nuclear weapons” when Moscow is acting “in response to the use of nuclear and other types of weapons of mass destruction against it and/or its allies, as well as in the event of aggression against the Russian Federation with the use of conventional weapons when the very existence of the state is in jeopardy.” The document also stated that Russia reserved the right to use nuclear weapons in case of an “attack by [an] adversary against critical governmental or military sites of the Russian Federation, disruption of which would undermine nuclear forces response actions.”

In 2024 Vladimir Putin ordered Russia’s nuclear doctrine to be updated to consider the complicated geopolitical realities that had emerged from the ongoing Special Military Operation (SMO) in Ukraine, where the conflict had morphed into a proxy war between the collective west (NATO and the US) and Russia.

The new doctrine declared that nuclear weapons would be authorized for use in case of an “aggression against the Russian Federation and (or) its allies by any non-nuclear state with the participation or support of a nuclear state is considered as their joint attack.”

Russia’s nuclear arsenal would also come into play in the event of “actions by an adversary affecting elements of critically important state or military infrastructure of the Russian Federation, the disablement of which would disrupt response actions by nuclear forces.”

The threats did not have to come in the form of nuclear weapons. Indeed, the new 2024 doctrine specifically stated that Russia could respond with nuclear weapons to any aggression against Russia involving “the employment of conventional weapons, which creates a critical threat to their sovereignty and (or) territorial integrity.”

Operation Spiderweb, the largescale assault on critical Russian military infrastructure directly related to Russia’s strategic nuclear deterrence by unmanned drones, has demonstrably crossed Russia’s red lines when it comes to triggering a nuclear retaliation and/or pre-emptive nuclear strike to preclude follow-on attacks. The

Ukrainian SBU, under the personal direction of its chief, Vasyl Malyuk, has taken responsibility for the attack.

Operation Spiderweb is a covert direct-action assault on critical Russian military infrastructure and capabilities directly related to Russia's strategic nuclear deterrent capabilities. At least three airfields were attacked using FPV drones operating out of the backs of civilian Kamaz trucks repurposed as drone launch pads. Dyagilevo airfield in Ryazan, Belaya airfield in Irkutsk, and Olenya airfield in Murmansk, home to Tu-95 and Tu-22 strategic bombers and A-50 early warning aircraft, were struck, resulting in numerous aircraft being destroyed and/or heavily damaged.

This would be the equivalent of a hostile actor launching drone strikes against US Air Force B-52H bombers stationed at Minot Air Force Base in North Dakota and at Barksdale Air Force Base in Louisiana, and B-2 bombers stationed at Whiteman Air Force Base in Missouri.

The timing of Operation Spiderweb is clearly designed to disrupt peace talks scheduled to take place in Istanbul on June 2.

First and foremost, one must understand that it is impossible for Ukraine to seriously prepare for substantive peace talks while planning and executing an operation such as Operation Spiderweb; while the SBU may have executed this attack, it could not have happened without the knowledge and consent of the Ukrainian President or the Minister of Defense.

Moreover, this attack could not have occurred without the consent of Ukraine's European partners, in particular Great Britain, France and Germany, all of whom were engaged in direct consultations with Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky in the days and weeks leading up to the execution of Operation Spiderweb.

The Ukrainians have been encouraged by Europe to be seen as actively supporting the Istanbul peace process, with an eye to the notion that if the talks failed, the blame would be placed on Russia, not Ukraine, thereby making it easier for Europe to continue providing military and financial support to Ukraine.

There appears to be a major role being played by US actors as well—Senator's Lyndsay Graham, a Republican from South Carolina, and Sydney Blumenthal, a Democrat from Connecticut, made a joint visit to Ukraine in the past week where they coordinated closely with the Ukrainian government about a new package of economic sanctions linked to Russia's willingness to accept peace terms predicated on a 30-day ceasefire—one of Ukraine's core demands.

Operation Spiderweb appears to be a concerted effort to drive Russia away from the Istanbul talks, either by provoking a Russian retaliation which would provide cover for Ukraine to stay home (and an excuse for Graham and Blumenthal to go forward with their sanctions legislation), or provoking Russia to pull out of the talks as it considers its options going forward, an act that would likewise trigger the Graham-Blumenthal sanctions action.

Unknown is the extent to which President Trump, who has been pushing for successful peace talks between Russia and Ukraine, was knowledgeable of the Ukrainian actions, including whether he approved of the action in advance (Trump appeared to be ignorant of the fact that Ukraine had targeted Russian President Putin using drones during a recent trip to Kursk.)

How Russia responds to this latest Ukrainian action is yet unknown; the drone attacks on Russian military bases came on the heels of at least two Ukrainian attacks on Russian rail lines that resulted in significant damage done to locomotives and passenger cars and killed and wounded scores of civilians.

But this much is clear: Ukraine could not have carried out Operation Spiderweb without the political approval and operational assistance of its western allies. The American and British intelligence services have both trained Ukrainian special operation forces in guerilla and unconventional warfare actions, and it is believed that previous Ukrainian attacks against critical Russian infrastructure (the Crimea bridge and Engels Air Base) were done with the assistance of US and British intelligence in the planning and execution phases. Indeed, both the Crimea bridge and Engels airbase attacks were seen as triggers for the issuing of Russia's 2024 nuclear doctrine modifications.

Russia has in the past responded to provocations by Ukraine and its western allies with a mixture of patience and resolve.

Many have interpreted this stance as a sign of weakness, something which may have factored in the decision by Ukraine and its western facilitators to carry out such a provocative operation on the eve of critical peace discussions.

The extent to which Russia can continue to show the same level of restraint as in the past is tested by the very nature of the attack—a massive use of conventional weapons which struck Russia's strategic nuclear deterrence force, causing damage.

It is not a stretch of the imagination to see this tactic being used in the future as a means of decapitating Russian strategic nuclear assets (aircraft and missiles) and leadership (the attack against Putin in Kursk underscores this threat.)

If Ukraine can position Kamaz trucks near Russian strategic air bases, it could do so against Russian bases housing Russia's mobile missile forces.

That Ukraine would carry out such attack likewise shows the extent to which western intelligence services are testing the waters for any future conflict with Russia—one that NATO and EU members say they are actively preparing for.

We have reached an existential crossroads in the SMO.

For Russia, the very red lines it deemed necessary to define regarding the possible use of nuclear weapons have been blatantly violated by not only Ukraine, but its western allies.

President Trump, who has been claiming to support a peace process between Russia and Ukraine, must now decide as to where the United States stands considering these developments.

His Secretary of State, Marco Rubio, has acknowledged that under the previous administration of Joe Biden the United States was engaged in a proxy war with Russia. Trump's Special Envoy to Ukraine, Keith Kellogg, recently acknowledged the same about NATO.

In short, by continuing to support Ukraine, both the US and NATO have become active participants in a conflict which has now crossed the threshold regarding the employment of nuclear weapons.

The United States and the world stand on the precipice of a nuclear Armageddon of our own making.

Either we separate ourselves from the policies that have brought us to this point, or we accept the consequences of our actions, and pay the price.

We cannot live in a world where our future is dictated by the patience and restraint of a Russian leader in the face of provocations we are ourselves responsible for.

Ukraine, not Russia, represents an existential threat to humanity.

NATO, not Russia, is responsible for encouraging Ukraine to behave in such a reckless manner.

So, too, is the United States. The contradictory statements made by US policy makers regarding Russia provide political cover for Ukraine and its NATO enablers to plan and execute operations like Operation Spiderweb.

Senators Graham and Blumenthal should be called out for sedition if their intervention in Ukraine was done to deliberately sabotage a peace process President Trump has said is central to his vision of American national security going forward.

But it is Trump himself who must decide the fate of the world.

In the coming hours we will undoubtedly hear from the Russian President about how Russia will respond to this existential provocation.

Trump, too, must respond.

By telling Graham and Blumenthal and their supporters to stand down regarding Russian sanctions.

By ordering NATO and the EU to cease and desist from continuing to provide military and financial support to Ukraine.

And by taking sides in the SMO.

Choose Ukraine and trigger a nuclear war.

Choose Russia and save the world.

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