

THE BROOKINGS INSTITUTION
TWITTER SPACES: CONVENTIONAL AND NUCLEAR RISKS IN UKRAINE

Washington, D.C.

Wednesday, March 23, 2022

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P R O C E E D I N G S

MS. KAUR: Okay. I think we can get started. Thanks everyone for tuning in. I'm Raman Preet Kaur from the Communications Department at Brookings. Today, I'm joined by Amy Nelson, who is a Rubenstein fellow in the Brookings Foreign Policy program, and Alex Montgomery of the political science department at Reed College. Amy and Alex are going to be answering audience questions about the security risks around the war in Ukraine. If you have any questions that you would like them to answer, please DM the Brookings account. So, jump right in with first question for Amy. Amy, you, and Alex recently wrote a piece about escalation aversion and how NATO is thinking about this. Can you please start by telling us what escalation aversion is and how do you think Putin is taking NATO'S escalation aversion into account for his military strategy?

MS. NELSON: Sure thing, Raman. And first of all, thanks so much for putting this together and thanks to everyone for listening in today. In the piece we describe a phenomenon we called "escalation aversion," which is basically a bias in which the careful weighing of multiple risks is actually abandoned in favor of the avoidance of a single worst case scenario outcome. In this case, it's escalation leading to nuclear war. These kinds of biases aren't unusual in decision-making processes, but they vary based on where you're making your decision, who you are, and what you stand to essentially lose at the outcome of the process. So, most people are moderately risk averse but the phenomenon we describe as escalation aversion this single risk is actually crowding out multiple risks that might otherwise be weighed in the decision-making process. It's a crucial goal to avoid escalation to nuclear war but as we had said in the piece and as you've said just now, Raman, the explicit focus gives the impression of paralysis and it seeds the initiative of President Putin, leaving him with first-mover advantage, waiting while NATO waits to see what he will do next.

MS. KAUR: Okay, thank you, Amy. Alex is the co-author of the piece; did you have anything to add?

MR. MONTGOMERY: The only thing I want to add is that what we're concerned about is not only escalation aversion itself, but also the appearance of escalation aversion. That is to say, that if Russia perceives that the West appears to escalation averse, that's the problem in that they're going to try to take advantage of that and that leaves us just handing over the initiative to them. So, it may be the case that we are not actually escalation averse but even the appearance of it can be bad in terms of enabling Putin to escalate or to potentially try to deter any moves that might be made by NATO or the West, more generally so, that's one of the reasons why we wanted to highlight it. It's a very specific distinction we're making here, while we recognize that the threat of nuclear war is higher now than any time since the end of the Cold War it is indeed something that we need to avoid. We also need to make it clear, or at least appear, that we are not going to be deterred from taking steps that we believe are in national or international interests in this conflict.

MS. KAUR: Thank you, Alex. I'm going to stay with you for a second. One of our audience questions was asking to please explain what a no-fly zone is and why NATO seems to be so against it? So, if you can please explain that for us.

MR. MONTGOMERY: Sure thing. So, a no-fly zone initially sounds like something fairly innocuous, you tell people they can't fly in this zone, and they don't. Now, the circumstances under which the U.S. has previously done this, most notably, was in Iraq just after the Persian Gulf War.

It is necessary to have air-superiority, air-dominance, air-supremacy, even, in that it involves constantly patrolling the area. It's not that one can declare it, one needs to have planes up in the sky 24/7, flying over a country which is the size of the state of Texas, and shooting down, or at least threatening to shoot down, any aircraft that happen to violate the no-fly zone. Now, part of that, in order to try to minimize the risk to the planes which are carrying out the no-fly zone, is that we also would need to attack ground-to-air missiles, which are stationed outside of Ukraine in Russia in order to ensure that that the planes won't

get knocked down.

The problem here, of course, is that would indeed be an act of war and would pull NATO into the war in no uncertain terms with Russia. The other issue here, of course, is that planes are going to be shot down. The no-fly zones which we had in Iraq were essentially entirely uncontested whereas this is very contested airspace. Now the Ukrainians have been doing a very fantastic job of managing to keep some of their air defenses running, nonetheless. And there's been a very odd absence of Russian Air Force from this conflict. Indeed, the missile strikes they have been carrying out on Ukraine have actually been carried out, for the most part, from Russian air space, which does seem to indicate that even without a no-fly zone, that the Russians are trying to be cautious about sending at least certain types of aircraft.

Now, they are using combat helicopters in a number of places, nonetheless, and during the day. But most of the strikes they are carrying out are actually at night and actually fired from outside Ukraine's territory. So, the no-fly zone problem is that it would definitely pull NATO into a direct war. The other problem is that it isn't necessarily the thing which would help Ukraine the most right now. So, a lot of the attacks on civilians that you're seeing now via artillery are not coming from Ukraine's air space. Having a no-fly zone in Ukraine's air space doesn't actually help us if all of the ordinance is being fired off from inside Russian territory.

So, a lot of risk and not just risk, there's a certainty that this would pull NATO more general war. But also, not a whole lot of benefits to it either. That's essentially why NATO seems to be so against it. It makes perfect sense that Ukraine would ask for it but as Zelenskyy made it clear and has addressed U.S. Congress, he asked for give us this so please give us other types of weapons that would enable us to better defend ourselves.

MS. KAUR: And actually, that's a really good segue to our next audience question which I believe the Press Secretary was also asked the other day. It states, "Okay, with sending certain types of military aid, like guns and ammunition, to Ukraine but not

certain types of planes?" Alex if you can take that one, as well.

MR. MONTGOMERY: Yeah, sure. So, part of this is that the provision of weapons to conflicts like this one is, I have a couple of colleagues who have written about this, Oona Hathaway at Yale, and Scott Shapiro, have pointed out this idea that all other countries must be neutral and can't do anything is not the case especially when you are supplying arms to the defender, not the aggressor. NATO sees, and apparently Russia sees, the provisions of the types of weaponry we have provided so far to not be worthy of escalation.

Which isn't to say that Russia has tried to say some things in order to try to compel NATO to stop supplying these arms but none of them have been credible and none of them have been followed up by actions. One way to interpret the probably hypersonic missile; the Kinzhal, which was actually an air-launched ballistic missile launched close to the border with Poland, was as a warning shot or as a capability demonstration or maybe just to try to change the narrative about what's going on. Now, planes on the other hand; part of the problem here was there was a lack of internal messaging in the United States government so State Departments said "Yes, we definitely favor this," and the Defense Department said "No," and the answer ending up being "no". And then our Polish allies probably must have gotten frustrated and said, "Why don't send them to Ramstein?" where they can be flown into Ukraine. Flying combat aircraft from a NATO country into Ukraine is certainly something which could very easily accidentally be considered an act of war and could escalate further. I'm sure the Germans weren't happy with this. The Poles would have been very happy with this in part because it would have actually allowed them to upgrade their aircraft although they were good in their request in that they actually "We'll take used planes; we don't need brand new ones as replacement for our MIGs."

So, it's just a much higher risk of accidentally being considered escalation or actually being considered escalation. Now there was a very creative work-around for U.S. Domestic in World War II due to the Neutrality Act, in that the U.S. wanted to supply some

planes to the United Kingdom but they couldn't figure out a way to get around it until they figured out that what they would do is land them right across the Canadian border, drain them of fuel, they would tow them with horses across the border, where they would then be refueled and Canadian pilots would fly off.

Now I'm not suggesting that this would work this time but part of it does have to do with the specific delivery method of the planes. So that also is one of the reasons why our provision of arms currently is fine in that the delivery methods which used to be the aircrafts are no longer the aircraft. So, part of it's the weapon in that it could be seen as escalation and part of it actually has to do with the delivery method itself.

MS. KAUR: Thank you, Alex, that was a really helpful explanation. Next audience question I'm going to turn it over to Amy. Amy, one of the questions we got was, does the bad state of Russia's conventional forces raise concerns the Putin might escalate into the nuclear domain?

MS. NELSON: Great, thanks. Yes and no. As Alex said, the risk of nuclear war or for WMD attack has increased in recent weeks. Do I think it's imminent or even likely that Putin might drop a nuke? I don't. First of all, that would be inconsistent with Russia's Nuclear Declaratory Policy which allows for the use of nuclear weapons only if existentially threatened. The current state of the conflict is obviously not going well for Russia but to say that they're experiencing an existential threat at this point in time is premature.

I do think that there a lot of other desperate things. On the scale of desperation, the Russian military can turn to short of a nuclear weapon; so, increasingly powerful missiles, maneuverable missiles that are shot at longer ranges against which Ukraine is less able to defend or not at all able to defend, for example. There's a whole host of other approaches. So yes, it does raise the concern, it does increase it. Does it increase it significantly and right now? I would say no. Alex, do you have thoughts?

MR. MONTGOMERY: I would agree. I do think that it's possible that there could be a chemical or biological attack. Russia has been essentially signaling that it might

attempt to do a false flag attack by trying to spread around ideas about Ukraine's possession of biological or chemical weapons. And in number senses, that's a much lower threshold. The only thing I would add to that is the current campaign does appear to be moving much more towards direct tax on civilians and that one does not need nuclear chemicals or biological materials to kill a lot of civilians, artillery shells over a long period of time will also have the same kind of effect.

MS. KAUR: Okay, thanks both. Alex, a question from the audience for you; what will NATO do if Russia attacks one of its members? We've been hearing a lot of this statement that NATO will defend every inch of its territory, but what happens if NATO does get attacked?

MR. MONTGOMERY: That's right. So, there's no automatic trigger, I think it's Article 5 in which an attack on one is an attack on all. The only time that has been done is 9/11 which of course was not actually an attack of the State, it was an attack of a non-State actor. So, the nonetheless even absent that one would expect that NATO would still not attempt to escalate immediately as high as it could possibly go. For example, if the attack involves artillery or missiles on territory but no incursion of ground forces or if it's a limited attack then there might be a limited response. Possibly even a response that is slightly larger in order to send home the message that the U.S. and NATO more broadly is also willing to escalate. So, I have zero doubts, and no one should have any doubts that NATO will defend every member country. The proportionality of the response I think is going to be something which we would have to see exactly what it was.

I would say that I do not expect Russia to directly attack. It's clear right now that their conventional forces are at least at the moment are not operating very well at all. There seems to be zero chance that they would actually attempt a ground invasion. The only kind of circumstances that I would see Russia attacking NATO is an attempt to compel the U.S. and NATO in order to stop arms shipments into Ukraine. But I would suspect that what they would rely on is long range missile strikes on Ukraine, still inside Ukraine but just

inside the border in order to avoid that. But again, this is where you're taking risks and accidents can happen. India just accidentally launched a missile into Pakistan and, fortunately, Pakistan didn't do anything about it other than throw some shade. So, there are things short of attacking NATO that could be perceived as one or could accidentally be one which could lead to further escalation.

Now this would be Russia's fault, not NATO's. This isn't an escalation aversion kind of thing. Mostly what we want to do is avoid ruling things out in order to not communicate to Putin that he has a free hand in Ukraine.

MS. KAUR: Thank you, Alex. A follow-up question that was sent to us; and Amy feel free to jump in on this question as well, should NATO say more clearly what its own red lines are even as the U.S. has already said that it will stay out of the conflict in Ukraine?

MS. NELSON: That's a great question. So, an important thing to remember about NATO is there is not an automatic anything. Everything is a deliberative process and there have been very few instances in which we can see NATO decision-making on a whole host of outcomes or a variety of scenarios. So, we're all getting a big NATO education right now when the alliance was confronted with a shared threat but under unpredictable, unusual, or unanticipated circumstances. Ironically, it's a time in which action is of paramount importance but what we're going to see and what we are seeing is a lot of deliberation. So, a lot of sussing out where redlines are, thresholds, a building of the escalatory ladder. We might expect soon if not already, to see weak link states that are less supportive of a unified NATO front and/or states that are might be more inclined to react militarily before other states are, as well.

MS. KAUR: Alex, did you have anything else to add?

MR. MONTGOMERY: Yes. NATO is not the kind of body that is likely to set redlines. It would be more likely the United States or the United States in concert with a few other countries. Remember the NATO is a defensive alliance at its core. Now of course it

has taken on offensive operations in Afghanistan, Kosovo, and Libya, which are one of the reasons that Russians are very suspicious of the defensive nature of NATO's alliance. Nonetheless I would expect to see a lot of behind-the-scenes consultation, which you won't see before the U.S., or any other actors set any kind of redlines. In the piece we discussed specifically that it would be very helpful if actors would try to prevent or stop in some cases all of this targeting of civilians. I would say that is the primary way that we suggest we might actually want to do something about it and have a fairly specific "If the killings of civilians do not stop then," for example, "we will provide counterfire systems to Ukraine." Something which matches the kinds of civilian attacks which Russia is carrying out right now.

MS. NELSON: And I would just add that this is the fine line we're alluding to in the piece where there is a deliberative process need for decision-making, at the same time there's a certain benefit to not stating your strategy out loud. I would hope that we'll see a careful balance of those two requirements; the need to send clear messages and signals to Russia combined with a keeping quiet on the strategic elements that keep Russia guessing, I guess I would say.

MS. KAUR: Gotcha, thank you both. Next, Amy I have a sort of scary question for you from our audience; do we have any meaningful way to neutralize Russia's first-strike capabilities?

MS. NELSON: That is a scary question and I know that nukes are really keeping people up at night. The upside of that is a lot more hard thinking, a lot more creativity, a lot more bandwidth and attention generally, will now be focused on nuclear threats, countering those threats, educating those threats, that we probably haven't seen in some time. But I would say no, this is exactly the escalation we're trying to avoid. We do not want to approach the scenario from that vantage point of seeking to neutralize Russia's first-strike capability. That would be incredibly destabilizing, not to mention as I said escalatory.

MS. KAUR: Thank you, Amy. Alex, did you have anything further to add on

that question?

MR. MONTGOMERY: I guess I would say no, we don't have any meaningful way to neutralize it and we shouldn't be looking for one either because that would be massively destabilizing. There was an article by Daryl Press about eight years or so ago in which they essentially argued that the U.S. maybe accidentally has achieved nuclear primacy due to deterioration of Russian early warning systems and strategic systems, such as submarines. These are kinds of things that we shouldn't be talking about but I do want to be clear that when I say "Yeah, we should be averse at that," and the main point of our piece is that as long as we are taking prudent steps, which we are, in order to try to limit the likelihood of a conflict going nuclear, that still leaves a lot of things that we can still do.

MS. KAUR: And the piece that Amy and Alex are referencing I just pinned to the space here so if you wanted to click on that and read you are welcome to do that. Okay, Alex, another audience question for you; what are the three big steps NATO can take now to help Ukraine in its fight against Russia? Amy you and Alex have both addressed this, but Alex, if you could sort of lay out those three big steps that NATO can take to help Ukraine right now.

MR. MONTGOMERY: Sure thing. So, under the setting redlines, we talked about specifically providing counterfire systems to Ukraine, placing additional OSCE observers, that wouldn't be NATO, of course, on the ground in Ukraine which is why we say sometimes the West more broadly aiding evacuation of refugees. But NATO more specifically; some of this is incredibly boring and quotidian, some of it is ensuring that the stinger missiles and the javelins which the U.S. and NATO more broadly are providing, are being manufactured at a sufficient rate and provided to Ukraine at a sufficient rate such that they're not going to run out of them. So, there are possibilities that the production act could be invoked in order to do that. I do think that is appropriate during war times, not necessarily wars that the U.S. is in. The Pentagon has ended up changing their budgeting structure and acquisition structure to try to get this to happen and I'm hoping to see that very soon, some

shifts in that area.

Another way which NATO could help—so, we are opposed to the no-fly zones, and we think that provision of airplanes, at least in the way that Poland suggested, is probably not a good idea right now—is preparation for a longer war. We need to keep in mind that almost all wars end with some sort of a negotiated agreement between the parties. Even the supposedly unconditional surrender in World War II of Japan was in fact conditioned in that the Japanese did manage to strap the concession that the emperor would manage to stay on the throne. What it looks like right now is that this war could go on for quite a long time and U.S. needs to more broadly be thinking about longer term provision of weapon systems that maybe aren't used right now because the Ukrainians need to be trained on them or to involve Ukrainians in training on them now.

So, for example, these MIGS have been re-outfitted with NATO-compliant equipment and so they are not exactly the same as the MIGS which the Ukrainian Air Force is now flying. So, it would be a good idea right now for the U.S. to be thinking about okay, if we actually want to provide these a couple of months down the road, what are all the steps which we need to start taking now in order for that to happen, in order for that to be an effective way for resupplying Ukraine.

So, I think it's continuing provision of specific systems, providing additional systems which the Ukrainians are already trained on which could help them particularly in a defending civilians role. For example, some of the counterfire radars that the U.S. has already trained Ukrainians on, we could supply more of those. There are more exotic things, such as thinking about providing them with an on-ground Phalanx system, but Ukrainians don't have experience with that. So, for those types of systems, we should be trying to train Ukrainians right now on using them, even if we're not going to ultimately supply them because there is long latency with the provision of more sophisticated weapon systems that require a focus now. Part of the problem of course is if NATO is doing this right, we won't hear about this. They should be doing this in secret in order to not tip our hand and give

Putin an opportunity to try to deter us from providing these types of systems. So, there is a bit of a dilemma there. So, in some sense, the less we hear the better.

MS. KAUR: Amy, did you have something that you wanted to add? And just as a reminder, the question was what are the three big steps NATO can take to help Ukraine now in its fight against Russia?

MS. NELSON: Yeah, it's a great question. And a recurring theme in our violent agreement is centered around this idea that maybe we don't want to say too much publicly and maybe we have said too much publicly previously, and by "us" I mean NATO and the United States, and to know the areas in which we're likely not to hear too much. That said, I think also tightening up sanctions. Next-level sanctions are definitely on the agenda for Biden in Poland this week, a total ban on Russian oil. Fundamentally, the project at this point is to apply additional pressure on Putin and bring Russia to the negotiation table. So those are also actions we could take at this time.

MS. KAUR: Thank you, Amy. Another question for you, and I think we have time for about two more questions before we are going to wrap up. So, Amy, one of our audience members asked, why is it so significant that Biden is going to Poland this week? What should we expect to hear about the trip? What should Biden accomplish while he's there?

MS. NELSON: So, a tiny question there?

MS. KAUR: You have 30 seconds. I'm just kidding. Please, go on.

MS. NELSON: Great. I think that alliance cohesion is of paramount importance, which I've said before. I think that the trip is a strong signal of the importance of the alliance, and it reveals that no one takes for granted the continued cohesion. So, much like arms control treaties, for example, requires active maintenance and constant attention particularly in times of crisis. Again, I want to emphasize the heavily deliberative processes that underly NATO functionality. So, I think that the greatest thing we can expect or that we might hope to see is a strong and continued statement of alliance cohesion. And once

again, just like Alex just said, a number of other things I would hope we won't hear about, namely strategic developments and operational requirements.

MS. KAUR: Thank you, Amy. Alex, did you have anything to add, any thoughts or concerns about Biden's trip to Poland?

MR. MONTGOMERY: No, I think Amy covered it very effectively there.

MS. KAUR: Okay, great. So last question for you, Alex, before we wrap up. What does the war in Ukraine signal for the security of Europe? Does the war shift the balance of powers within Europe itself, within the EU?

MR. MONTGOMERY: Another small question. So, I think that what we're seeing here is that the secondary effects of the war, which includes most notably I would say is Germany deciding to increase its defense budget to two percent and to send weapons to Ukraine, is enormous. This is something which the U.S. has been trying to get Europe to do in various methods, some of them more polite than others, for the past decade or two. And so, what has happened is that Russia has essentially caused a massive balancing coalition against it.

We're looking at huge swings in public opinion in Sweden and Finland in favor of joining NATO which one would not have expected to see absent of war. And so essentially what it's causing in Europe is re-arming itself against Russia. So, in some sense, it's all of the countries within NATO and then countries which are collaborating or may end up in NATO moreover are much more secure than they ever were previously. Not just because of this re-arming but also because of the poor performance of Russia's conventional forces on the ground. So, I think that comes to a great relief in many parts of Europe. So, I would expect to see more defense cooperation and re-armament. More broadly, the countries that aren't in NATO but would like to be in NATO will probably be banging harder on the door. Sweden and Finland can't join instantly, every country needs to have a plan and hit certain targets but neither of those countries would have any problem meeting any sort of plan which NATO sets out.

I think that you're seeing a broader resurgence now. This does leave in question some of the countries which are right on the border or already have Russian presence, Moldova, and Georgia of course, there's been some conversations about how Russia may actually be pulling its troops out of the occupied territories in Georgia. I would not be super surprised if Georgia tried to do something there. I hope they don't because again, Russia has a lot of ability to punish and punish civilians in particular. But I think you're going to see a lot of alignment with NATO with a couple of notable exception, primary one being Serbia in which there at least appears to be a great deal of public support for Russia, and we'll see if that continues as the war goes on.

MS. NELSON: I also want to add that I think we'll see the European Defense Fund and PESCO Projects that have been coming out of Europe since 2017 and creating a lot of consternation in the Transatlantic relationship; I think we'll see a great deal of support now for those Projects coming from this side of the Atlantic and hopefully less tension surrounding the idea that Europe wants to innovate among Europeans to locate the ability-gaps on the continent.

MS. KAUR: Okay, thank you. Thank you, Amy. Thank you, Alex. And thank you to all of our listeners for tuning in and sending us your questions about this topic. We didn't get to everything but please do stay tuned, follow us at @brookingsinst for notifications about future Twitter spaces conversations on the war in Ukraine. Please also be sure to follow Amy and Alex on Twitter to stay up to date with their research and analysis and we'll wrap it up there for now. Thank you everyone.

MR. MONTGOMERY: Thank you.

MS. NELSON: Thanks so much, Raman, and thanks to everyone for listening today.

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