Putin’s Nuclear Threat:

- In televised comments on Sunday, Russia’s President Putin aggressively and dangerously raised the stakes in the Ukraine war with the order to his defense minister and the chief of the military’s General Staff to put the nation’s nuclear forces in a “special regime of combat duty” in response to what he called “aggressive statements” by leading NATO powers. Putin said he was responding to not only “western countries…unfriendly actions in the economic sphere” but “aggressive statements” by leading NATO powers.

- Ukraine’s President Zelensky’s office announced that Zelensky agreed to talks without preconditions with Russia in Belarus, after initially rejecting the offer and the location. Zelensky said he “did not really believe in the outcome of this meeting but let them try so that later not a single citizen of Ukraine has any doubt” that he tried to stop the war. The talks will reportedly start on Monday.

- The US response so far led by White House Press secretary Jen Psaki and the US UN ambassador Linda Thomas-Greenfield has been that Putin is “continuing to escalate the war in a totally unacceptable way and we have to continue to stem his actions in the strongest possible way.”

- Putin’s announcement escalates even further nuclear saber-rattling threats he and other leading Russian officials made in the run-up to the invasion of Ukraine, including his warning in a speech at the start of the invasion started that Russia’s response to any country that stood in its way would be immediate and carry “consequences that you have never encountered in your history.” A few days ago, Putin also threatened to end compliance on the constraints on strategic nuclear weapons by withdrawing from the New START, an important and last-standing bilateral nuclear arms control agreement.

- Since Putin first assumed office twenty years ago, he has relied heavily on Russia’s nuclear superpower status and on saber rattling tactics to elevate the prestige and respect he believes Russia was being denied by the West and the international community.

- Whether Putin is simply lashing out in response to sanctions or frustrated by the resistance Russia has met in Ukraine and trying to end this invasion before supply lines, troop morale and quiet alignment from China begin to dissipate, he has now brought the world closest to a superpower nuclear conflict since the Cuban Missile crisis. His threat is aimed at “NATO leaders”, not solely Ukraine.

- The crisis has become more destabilizing also because Putin’s very public nuclear threat escalation announcement puts his leadership and credibility on the line. This only increases the pressure that he succeed in achieving his goals and also decreases even further the options for an off ramp. Krushchev’s power was immediately curtailed after the Cuban Missile Crisis for his
overreach and then retreat from placing nuclear weapons in Cuba. He was removed from office within two years, a legacy looming over Putin.

- Putin’s nuclear escalation, while dangerous and very destabilizing does provide several important opportunities for President Biden in this crisis: to weaken Putin internally, to counter his aggression multilaterally, and to further erode Russia’s stature in the world. With the threat of nuclear use, the President is in an even stronger position to secure more unity among NATO, European and Asian allies and partners on economic sanctions; he has an even stronger opportunity to appeal to China’s Xi and India’s Modi, to leverage their relationships with Putin to end this crisis and possible even curtail their own economic lifelines to Putin; and, the US is in a stronger position to mobilize global public opinion in international organizations, and to benefit from a potentially even more heightened level of global public outrage.

**Translating the threat into force posture**

- How Putin’s order actually changes Russia’s nuclear force posture in tangible terms is under review by the Defense Department but it clearly raises the possibility and price of any miscalculation during the fog of war. A portion of US and Russian nuclear forces are always on alert and how Russia changes that status will escalate the crisis and pressure the US and NATO to respond to the nuclear signaling. Among the movements analysts will be looking for would be Russia putting more strategic missiles on alert or moving non-short and medium range nuclear missiles and custodial units closer to the Ukraine border and Europe, including accepting Belarus’ offer to host Russian nuclear weapons.

**Nuclear Weapons:**

- There are approximately 12,700 nuclear weapons held by nine countries. This is down from a peak of 70,300 in 1986 at the peak of the Cold War.

- Of the approximately 13,000 nuclear weapons, US and Russia possess 90 percent of those with approximately 4,000 nuclear warheads each in their nuclear stockpiles (and about 2000 each waiting to be dismantled). Approximately 2,000 US, Russian, British and French warheads are on high alert, ready for use on short notice.

- Russia’s nuclear arsenal includes a stockpile of approximately 4,477 warheads with 1,588 strategic warheads deployed on long-range systems able to reach the United States—ballistic missiles, land and sea based, and heavy bomber bases. 977 strategic and 1912 nonstrategic warheads are held in reserve. Russia is estimated to have up to 2000 non-strategic or shorter-range nuclear weapons.

- As of February 23rd, 2022 some of the Russian delivery vehicles that are deployed near Ukraine are considered to be dual capable, meaning they can be used to launch either conventional or nuclear weapons, however there has been no indication to date that Russia has deployed nuclear weapons or nuclear custodial units along with those delivery vehicles.
Nuclear Strategy

- While Russia’s publicly stated policy on nuclear deterrence, as articulated in 2020, details Russia’s policy that nuclear weapons are “exclusively” a means of deterrence, the debate about Russia’s strategy has reached a heightened level of intensity over the past couple of years. The US 2018 Nuclear Posture Review stated that Russia mistakenly follows a doctrine that using nuclear weapons first would deescalate a conflict.

- Some defense experts have argued that Russia’s strategy is escalate to win and that Russian leaders have been signaling over the years a willingness to use nuclear weapons even before an adversary retaliates against a Russian conventional attack by “employing the threat of selective and limited use of nuclear weapons to forestall opposition to potential aggression”, i.e., Russia would potentially use nuclear weapons first to scare an adversary into not even defending itself.

- One of Russia’s four stated conditions under which Russia could launch nuclear weapons in its Nuclear Deterrence doctrine is “aggression against the Russian Federation with the use of conventional weapons when the very existence of the state is in jeopardy.” Putin’s statement that focused on economic sanctions and “aggressive” statements by NATO leaders could be read as a way of his attempting to thread that needle.