

# Fifty shades of red: where does Russia draw the line?

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From the outset, the war on Ukraine came with a particular feature attached: the threat of nuclear escalation. As President Putin stated in his 24 February speech, “whoever tries to hinder us or threaten our country or our people should know that Russia’s response will be immediate and will lead you to consequences that you have never faced in your history.”<sup>1</sup> Rather than deterring any type of support to Ukraine, this has instead led to a discussion about what exactly would trigger a nuclear escalation: where do Russia’s red lines really lie?

## Summary

Russia has repeatedly indicated that it would make use of its nuclear arsenal once certain “red lines” were crossed.

The ambiguity of its language leads to widespread fear and speculation about nuclear war.

Rather than being escalatory, the red lines have de-escalatory effects due to their deterrent nature.

<sup>1</sup> Reuters, “EU Says Putin’s Ominous Threat to Those Who Hinder Him Marks ‘Critical Moment’,” Reuters, 24 February 2022, <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/eu-says-putins-ominous-threat-those-who-hinder-him-marks-critical-moment-2022-02-24/>.

This paper is structured as follows: it defines what “red lines” are in international relations theory, and outlines the narratives and timeline associated with their use in the war on Ukraine. It then proposes three shades of red to categorize the different degrees of threat they represent. It concludes that Russia’s nuclear rhetoric has decreased rather than increased the chances of a major escalation of the conflict.

The expression “red line” to denote a point of no return comes from the little Italian river Rubicon, which Julius Caesar crossed in 49 BCE, leading to the Roman civil war. The English version of this is often dated back to the “Red Line Agreement” in 1928 between Western oil companies, which divided up areas of operation at the end of the Ottoman Empire with a red pencil. It has since been used repeatedly in contexts involving international conflict, such as the use of chemical weapons in Syria. In all cases, “red line” is understood as a last warning not to cross or there will be escalation.

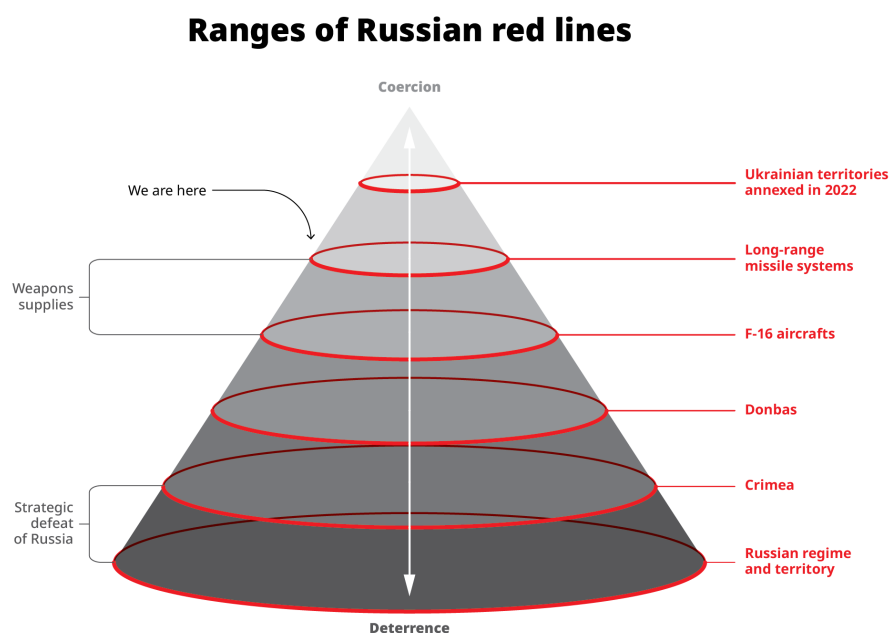
## Definition and chronology

In international relations, “red lines” are defined as “*the manipulation of an adversary’s intent through (mostly public) statements for deterrence purposes, referring to the deliberate crossing of a certain threshold by an adversary and relevant counteraction if this threshold is crossed.*”<sup>2</sup> Red lines are therefore more than just an escalatory step or point of no return, they are first and foremost a communication mechanism aimed at deterrence, indicating what would happen if a certain step was taken.

In the context of Ukraine, Russia has expressed such red lines on multiple occasions following the first occurrence on 24 February 2022. Three days later, Russia declared putting its nuclear forces on alert after Ukraine requested a no-fly zone, leading to the cancellation of a deal to supply Polish MIG-29 bombers to Ukraine under the aegis of the United States.<sup>3</sup> In late May 2022, when the U.S. adopted a bill on comprehensive military assistance to Ukraine, Moscow issued a new threat, declaring the supply of long-range systems to Kyiv “intolerable.”<sup>4</sup> Putin himself emphasized that Russia had “sufficient quantities [of weapons] to strike those facilities that we have not been attacking so far”, hinting at a possible escalation of war if the long-range missile systems were supplied to Ukraine. One of the most intimidating messages was in

**Figure 1: Ranges of Russian red lines**

Source: Image provided by the author



<sup>2</sup> Bruno Tertrais, “The Diplomacy of ‘Red Lines,’” *Recherches & Documents* N°02/2016 (Paris: The Foundation for Strategic Research, 21 February 2016), <https://www.frstrategie.org/en/publications/recherches-et-documents/diplomacy-red-lines-2016>.

<sup>3</sup> Tzvi Joffe, “Russian FM Warns World War 3 Will Be ‘Devastating Nuclear War,’” *The Jerusalem Post*, 2022, <https://www.jpost.com/international/article-699089>.

<sup>4</sup> Andrew Stanton, “What Russia Has Said About U.S. Supplying Ukraine With Long-Range Missiles,” *Newsweek*, 2022, <https://www.newsweek.com/what-russia-has-said-about-us-supplying-ukraine-long-range-missiles-1712940>.

Putin's speech on 21 September 2022. In the context of the official annexation of certain Ukrainian regions, he stated "if Russia feels its territorial integrity is threatened, we will use all defense methods at our disposal, and this is not a bluff."<sup>5</sup> In early 2023, when the U.S. and some allies adopted the decision to supply Ukraine with more advanced weapons, such as tanks and F-16 aircraft, the Russian Ambassador to the U.S., Anatoly Antonov, pointed out that any Ukrainian strike on Crimea would be considered a strike on Russia, while Russian Foreign Minister Lavrov called it an "unacceptable escalation".<sup>6</sup> In reality, of course, Russia has so far not made any use of nuclear weapons although its own red lines have been crossed.

## How to "red line": the options

The problem with red lines is that they are first and foremost a communication exercise, and as such a constructive red line is one that clearly communicates the circumstances and/or the threshold as well as the consequences of crossing it.<sup>7</sup> Russia has done none of those things. Instead, it has made use of different sets of red lines we can define as going from "dark red" to "light pink" depending on context.

"Dark red" can be defined as any action taken by Ukraine and its supporters that could be interpreted by Russia as a provocation leading to nuclear use – ranging from Russia being challenged to threatened, let alone humiliated or defeated. This reading has been supported by extensive Russian propaganda efforts.<sup>8</sup> Under this shade of red even the supply of long-range weapons to Ukraine, which could be used in attacks on Russian cities, could trigger the escalation of the conflict to a nuclear level, as it is viewed as "intolerable" in Putin's May 2022 speech.<sup>9</sup> Similarly, Putin considered the delivery of fighter jets to Ukraine as a "red line" in his speech of 21 February 2023.<sup>10</sup> Russian pundits take part in this deterrence game. For example, Dmitry Trenin, former head of Moscow

Carnegie, commented: "So far Moscow has only reacted – or preferred to postpone its reaction – to some of the West's actions. But this defensive approach may change. Poland has, from the very start, served as the main rear base in the Ukrainian conflict. From the standpoint of the Russian military strategy, it has thus turned into a potential military target, including for nuclear strikes."<sup>11</sup> It has not gone unnoticed that Ukraine's supporters have mostly ignored Russia's threats, which has raised the question of a cumulative effect: if several smaller red lines are crossed, do they ultimately lead to a more muscular response? "Yes, they do," President Putin replied.<sup>12</sup>

The second reading of Russia's red lines suggests that their ambiguity is intentional, as the void can be filled with Western fears of escalation. This would mean that there are no clear red lines in Russia's perception, only a range of options regarding their potential risks and benefits. In fact, Russia has repeatedly used direct and indirect nuclear threat language even before the war on Ukraine, turning it into a foreign policy staple rather than it being "just" a weapon.<sup>13</sup> The problem with this approach is that it requires credibility to be successful. Instead of responding with fear, as many commentators have, states have the choice to respond in kind. In October 2022, in response to Putin's speech on "using all weapons systems available" to retain annexed territories, the Biden administration sent strong signals to the Russian leadership that any nuclear use against Ukraine will be retaliated against with a conventional strike.<sup>14</sup> In an almost immediate response, Putin and his foreign ministry suddenly ruled out the possibility of a Russian nuclear attack on Ukraine. This in turn would suggest that Russia uses its nuclear arsenal as a deterrent to keep the conflict at a lower level intentionally, in order to avoid direct confrontation with NATO. This reading is corroborated by the fact that Russia has not bombed weapon convoys from NATO member states to Ukraine, quite in contrast to its hands-on approach in Chechnya or Syria.

The third reading of Russia's red lines derives from Russian official deterrence doctrine, linking them with the territorial integrity of Russia and the regime's survival. In this case, the red line is a concept of basic deterrence, proclaiming nuclear use in response to weapons of mass destruction or conventional use "when the state's existence

- 5 Vladimir Putin, "Address by the President of the Russian Federation," Presidency of Russia, 21 September 2022, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/69390>.
- 6 Reuters, "Russia Says F-16s to Ukraine Would Raise Question of NATO Involvement | Reuters," Reuters, 2023, <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/russia-says-f-16-transfer-ukraine-would-raise-questions-natos-involvement-2023-05-22/>. TASS, "Lavrov Slams West's Plans to Send F-16s to Kiev as Unacceptable Escalation," Russian News Agency, 2023, <https://tass.com/politics/1624027>.
- 7 Tertrais, "The Diplomacy of 'Red Lines'."
- 8 Keir Giles, "Russian Nuclear Intimidation: How Russia Uses Nuclear Threats to Shape Western Responses to Aggression," *Research Paper*, Chatham House, Roylall Institute of International Affairs, 29 March 2023, <https://doi.org/10.5531/79781784135645>. Samuel Charap and Miranda Priebe, *Avoiding a Long War: U.S. Policy and the Trajectory of the Russia-Ukraine Conflict* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2023), <https://doi.org/10.7249/PEA2510-1>.
- 9 Dzen, "Возгонка вооружений. Академик Арбатов — о ядерной угрозе и «Минске-3» [Arms Dismantling. Academician Arbatov on the Nuclear Threat and Minsk-3]", Dzen, accessed 30 May 2023, <https://dzen.ru/a/Y97LvVeUuQp1OOTg>.
- 10 Interview with Nikolai Sokov, conducted by the author on 10 March 2023.
- 11 Dmitry Trenin, «Мысли о немыслимом: зачем Россия отправляет ядерное оружие в Белоруссию [Thoughts on the Unthinkable: Why Russia Sends Nuclear Weapons to Belarus],» Russian International Affairs Council, 2023, <https://russiancouncil.ru/analytics-and-comments/comments/mysli-o-nemyslimom-zachem-rossiya-otpravlyaet-yadernoe-oruzhie-v-belorussiyu/>.
- 12 Kommersant, "Путин назвал поставки оружия Украине пересечением красных линий [Putin Called Arms Supplies to Ukraine Crossing Red Lines]", Kommersant, 26 March 2023, <https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/5899907>.
- 13 Polina Sinovets and Valeriia Hesse, "Russia's Foreign and Security Policy: The Evolution of the Escalation Strategy," in *Arms Control and Europe*, ed. Polina Sinovets and William Alberque, Contributions to International Relations (Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2022), pp.21–28, [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-03891-4\\_3](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-03891-4_3).
- 14 Edward Helmore, "Jake Sullivan: US Will Act 'Decisively' If Russia Uses Nuclear Weapons in Ukraine," *The Guardian*, 25 September 2022, <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2022/sep/25/us-russia-ukraine-war-nuclear-weapons-jake-sullivan>.

is in jeopardy,” as Russia’s official document on this matter states.<sup>15</sup> The only issue with this aspect is that it, too, has not been defined. Under what circumstances would Putin interpret Western actions as leading to his downfall?<sup>16</sup> In his speech to the Federal Assembly, the Russian president justified his suspension of the New START by pointing to the “strategic defeat of Russia” as being the aim pursued by the West.<sup>17</sup> Similarly, territorial integrity is a blurred concept in a context of annexation: is Crimea a red line for Russia or not? Russian rhetoric and actions seem to suggest that it is.<sup>18</sup> Of course, the same question may be asked of the Donbas, the defence of which has become the official reason for Putin’s “special military operation” against Ukraine. However, in spite of the laws recently adopted by Russia on the integration of the Donbas into its territory, this had never been the commonly accepted narrative before last year, and the whole debate on the Minsk agreements from 2015 to 2022 shows that unlike Crimea, there had not been a common Russian perception of the Donbas as Russian territory.<sup>19</sup>

## Look at the effects

Rather than analysing Russian rhetoric, one could also analyse Russian actions. As Aleksey Polyanskiy, Russia’s Deputy Permanent Representative to the UN has stated,

*“we send more and more signals showing that some red lines have already been crossed, but maybe the reddest lines have not been crossed yet.”*<sup>20</sup> The use of nuclear rhetoric might not have stopped Western support to Ukraine, but it has slowed it down. For example, a recurring request by Ukraine to the U.S. about supplying Army Tactical Missiles Systems (ATACMS), with a range of about 300 km, has constantly failed during the first 1,5 years of the war. As one report stated, *“thus far, the West has communicated that the best that it can muster when it comes to vertical escalation is to second-guess and, ultimately, self-deter.”*<sup>21</sup> But in reality, since the beginning of the war, support has increased both in quantity and quality. For example, in September the U.S. has finally sent the small quantity of ATACMS to Ukraine to have bigger supplies in the future. At the same time, Western states have carefully avoided aspects they have intuitively understood as escalatory. This means mutual deterrent rhetoric has lowered the possibility of a major conflict between NATO and Russia, and has therefore had some containing effect. With the suspension of the New START, the withdrawal of Russia from the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty hinting at the renewal of nuclear testing as well as the declaration regarding the deployment of nuclear weapons in Belarus, it is safe to assume that nuclear rhetoric will remain a constant feature of this conflict.

- 15 Executive Order of the President and of the Russian Federation, “Basic Principles of State Policy of the Russian Federation on Nuclear Deterrence” (Moscow: The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, 2 June 2020), [https://archive.mid.ru/en/web/guest/foreign\\_policy/international\\_safety/disarmament/-/asset\\_publisher/rp0fiUBmANaH/content/id/4152094](https://archive.mid.ru/en/web/guest/foreign_policy/international_safety/disarmament/-/asset_publisher/rp0fiUBmANaH/content/id/4152094).
- 16 Leonid Bershidsky, “The Wishful Theory of ‘Strategic Russian Defeat’,” *Washington Post*, 19 October 2022, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/business/the-wishful-theory-of-strategic-russian-defeat/2022/10/19/fe3dacad2-4f6a-11ed-ada8-04e6e6bf8b19\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/business/the-wishful-theory-of-strategic-russian-defeat/2022/10/19/fe3dacad2-4f6a-11ed-ada8-04e6e6bf8b19_story.html).
- 17 Vladimir Putin, “Presidential Address to the Federal Assembly,” Presidency of Russia, 6 December 2014, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/47173>.
- 18 Interview with Rose Gottemoeller, conducted by the author on 10 April 2023. James M. Acton, “The Case for Caution on Crimea,” *War on the Rocks*, 2 February 2023, <https://warontherocks.com/2023/02/the-case-for-caution-on-crimea/>.
- 19 Interview with Rose Gottemoeller.
- 20 RBC, “Полянский не увидел пересечения Западом «наиболее красных линий» [Polyanskiy Did Not See the West Crossing the “Most Red Lines”], RBC, 24 January 2023, <https://www.rbc.ru/politics/24/01/2023/63cf7a8d9a7947c34e83386e>.
- 21 Andrew A. Michta, “Why Is the West Self-Detering in Ukraine?,” Atlantic Council, 2023, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/new-atlanticist/why-is-the-west-self-detering-in-ukraine/>.

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