

## US AND RUSSIAN MISSILES BRINKMANSHIP ESCALATES RUSSIA UKRAINIAN WAR

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### Introduction

The bar has been raised substantially in the last week as the Ukraine-Russia conflict passed its 1000th day. Western powers substantially boosted Ukraine's military arsenal while Russia reacted with a new nuclear doctrine and a strike by its Oreshnik (the hazel) missile.

On 18 Nov, the outgoing United States (US) President Joe Biden lifted restrictions on the use of US missiles to strike targets inside Russia. An important decision with deep strategic implications. The *volte face* (complete turnaround) marked a major policy change by Washington which for months had refused Ukraine's requests to use the missiles beyond its own borders.<sup>[1]</sup>

After this decision, a volley of Army Tactical Missile System (ATACMS) were fired by Ukraine into Russia's Bryansk region on 19 Nov. Russia said six were fired, with five intercepted. Whatever the specifics, this was a landmark moment: US missiles had struck Russian soil for the first time in this war. Next on 21 Nov, Ukraine launched the UK-supplied [Storm Shadow and the US HIMARs missiles](#) at targets in Russia's Kursk region.<sup>[2]</sup> Later in the week, President Biden added the final element of a ramped-up weapons arsenal to Ukraine by [approving the use of anti-personnel landmines](#).

There are now reports that the Spanish MIM-23 HAWK surface-to-air missile systems have been supplied to Ukraine on 24 Nov. Russia no wonder sees this as a sign of a proxy war being waged against it by the West.

In response, on 19 Nov, the 1000th day of the war, President Putin released changes to Russia's nuclear doctrine, lowering the threshold for the use of nuclear weapons. The doctrine now says an attack from a non-nuclear state, if backed by a nuclear power, will be treated as a joint assault on Russia.<sup>[3]</sup>

Taking a step further, Russia struck Dnipro with an 'Oreshnik'. Apparently, this missile travels at 10 times the speed of sound - and that there are 'No ways of counteracting this weapon'. The signal had a degree of clarity Russia could, if it chose, use the new missile to deliver a nuclear weapon. <sup>[4]</sup>

### Army Tactical Missile System

ATACMS are not new to battlefields, they were used both in Operation Desert Storm and Iraqi Freedom. More recently, they were used to engage targets in Crimea and Donstok during the war. However, this is the first time they have engaged targets on Russian soil.

The questions this *volte face* has prompted are what has changed to make it acceptable now, and what difference will it make for Ukraine? The answers to these questions are less about the damage that the ATACMS can inflict, and more about what they might enable, and whether their provision is a catalyst for others like Germany to provide similar kinds of support.

Their strikes on Russian territory have been narrowly presented to be in response to the reported presence of North Korean soldiers in Russia's Kursk Oblast. This is not convincing.[\[5\]](#)

The US military has a finite number of ATACMS and is not producing any more. For other Western long-range weapons, production rates may not at present meet the number that need to be expended to achieve significant battlefield effects. An example being Ukraine's firing of the UK's Storm Shadow arsenal at Russian deep targets in 2023 yet failed to degrade Russian command and control to a level that the Ukrainian military could take advantage of. [\[6\]](#)

Despite these limitations, the concentrated use of long-range weapons can inflict disproportionate damage against selected targets, thereby, opening up exploitable opportunities in Russia's defences. The question is whether the Ukrainian military is capable of exploiting the gap created.

However, for the past year, Ukrainian military has taken more casualties than it has recruited. A significant proportion of these casualties have suffered minor wounds and the soldiers have returned, but over time the result has been a hollowing out of units along the line of contact and, thus, a growing paucity that enabled Russia to make headway into Ukraine's defences in Donbas. Inability to carry-out force generation has prevented Ukraine from exploiting opportunities created by Russian vulnerabilities. [\[7\]](#)

Further, will these weapons be used to delay the onset of pressure on the Ukrainian front, thereby, affecting the timeline of events without actually altering the trajectory, or will they be used to create significant gaps in Russia's war waging potential that can be exploited.

The next question is what to strike. For any given target set there is a critical threshold of impacts that need to be achieved before there is a tangible effect on the fighting. While Ukraine destroyed three of ten ammunition dumps at a logistical echelon. The result is a reduction in rounds available for Russian units for a limited period, rather than a widespread scarcity of shells. The fact is that strikes need to be synchronised with a wider arsenal of weapons and must be aligned with the larger plan.[\[8\]](#)

The crux is selection of targets that will yield leverage in negotiations which are largely economic and industrial. The challenge, as per Dr Jack Watling of RUSI, "Is that the incoming US administration pushing negotiations is not the current administration approving strikes, and it seems unlikely that there is close strategic cooperation between them on how the latter could contribute to the former's strategy".[\[9\]](#)

## **Russia Nuclear**

Though President Putin had given insights about the key points of Russia's new doctrine in Sep the doctrine was announced on 19 Nov. The new nuclear doctrine states that it could launch nuclear weapons in response to an attack on its territory by a non-nuclear-armed state [backed by](#) a nuclear-armed one.[\[10\]](#)

It also lists additional scenarios under which Moscow would consider a nuclear response, including if it had reliable information about the launch of a massive cross-border air attack on Russia using aircraft, missiles and drones.

Russia also placed its close ally Belarus under its nuclear umbrella. Russia now says it may use nuclear weapons in the event of a conventional attack against itself or Belarus that "Creates a critical threat to their sovereignty or territorial integrity". Previously, Russia had said it might

meet a conventional attack with nuclear weapons “When the very existence of the state is placed under threat”.[11]

"Russia is lowering the threshold for a nuclear strike in response to a possible conventional attack", said Alexander Graef, a senior researcher at the Institute for Peace Research and Security Policy at the University of Hamburg. Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov said on the sidelines of the G-20 Summit that “If the long-range missiles are used from the territory of Ukraine against the Russian territory, it will mean that they are controlled by American military experts and we will view that as a qualitatively new phase of the Western war against Russia and respond accordingly”. He urged the US and other Western allies to study the modernized nuclear doctrine.[12]

### **Russia Fires an Intermediate-range Ballistic Missile (IRBM)**

The strike on Dnipro was described as unusual by eyewitnesses and triggered explosions which went on for three hours. The US believes Russia [fired a never-before-fielded IRBM](#) an escalation that analysts say could have implications for European missile defences.

Apparently, the missile is designed on Russia’s longer-range RS-26 Rubezh Intercontinental Ballistic Missile (ICBM). Pentagon spokesperson Sabrina Singh said, “It could be refitted to certainly carry different types of conventional or nuclear warheads”. [13]

US and United Kingdom sources indicated that they believed the missile fired was an experimental nuclear-capable, IRBM, which has a range of below 5,500km. That is enough to reach [Europe](#) from where it was fired in South-Western Russia, but not the US. Capable of carrying up to ten warheads with a speed of 10 Mach, it cannot be intercepted and theoretically takes only 20 minutes to engage targets in London and Paris.[14]

Timothy Wright, at the International Institute for Strategic Studies, said Russia’s development of new missiles might influence decisions in North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) countries regarding what air defence systems to purchase as well as which offensive capabilities to pursue.

A new US Ballistic Missile Defence Base in Northern Poland has already drawn angry reactions from Moscow. The US Base at Redzikowo is part of a broader NATO missile shield and is designed to intercept short-to IRBM.[15]

However, President Putin said that the launch of the new IRBM was not a response to the base in Poland but instead to recent Ukrainian long-range strikes inside Russian territory with Western weapons.

The Russian President said that Moscow had struck a Ukrainian military facility with a new ballistic missile and said its deployment “Was a response to US plans to produce and deploy intermediate and short-range missiles”, and that [Russia](#) would ‘Respond decisively and symmetrically’ in the event of an escalation.

Russia had targeted a Missile and Space Rocket Company Pivdenmash, known as Yuzhmash by Russians, in Dnipro. A Pentagon spokesperson said the US was [pre-notified](#) regarding the launch through nuclear risk reduction channels just prior to the launch. However, this incident demonstrates the risk of escalation.[16]

As per President Putin "There is no countermeasure to such a missile, no means of intercepting it, in the world today" while emphasising “that we will continue testing this newest system”. [17]

## Conclusion

This week's developments may not be enough to change the tide of war as far as Ukraine is concerned but has opened up a new dimension till the start of a tussle for the strongest negotiating position in potential future talks to end it.

Trump in a pre-election speech had promised a radically different approach to the war. But Donald Trump Jr recently tweeted 'The Military Industrial Complex seems to want to make sure they get World War III going before my father has a chance to create peace and save lives'.

The questions that need to be answered are if these missile attacks were a symbolic decision to raise the stakes and demonstrate Western support for Ukraine at a time when President elect Trump is threatening to pull the rug or is there a larger game plan that involves tying the President elects' hands as far as negotiations are concerned.

This move is clearly about [the transition](#) from one US administration to the next. As per Anatol Lieven: the 'More negative way of assessing this' is that the Biden administration is seeking to scuttle Trump's promises to end the fighting; the 'More positive' take is that the Biden administration is seeking to strengthen Ukraine's hand before future negotiations; and the third alternative is that the policy change was needed to respond to shifting conditions on the ground.

The fact is that President Zelensky's strategy so far has been to frame the war as an existential struggle for Ukraine but also Europe and the US, hence, decisions like this only play into his hands. While Gallup polling provides a snapshot of a trend suggesting that where in the first two years of the war a large majority of Ukrainians prioritised outright victory over ending the war, now [half favor immediate talks](#).

The use of long-range missiles has significant strategic, diplomatic and geopolitical consequences increasing the volatility of the conflict. Unfortunately, the very essence and nature of war has now changed dramatically and the world is a far more dangerous place.

## Endnotes

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[3] Davies, Maia. 2024. "Putin approves changes to Russia's nuclear doctrine." November 19, 2024. <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/cj4v0rey0jzo>.

[4] Maj Gen Jagatbir Singh (Rtd) “Why US, Russia are opting for brinkmanship instead of talks to end Ukraine war.” Firstpost, December 3, 2024. <https://www.firstpost.com/opinion/why-us-russia-are-opting-for-brinkmanship-instead-of-talks-to-end-ukraine-war-13841132.html>.

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[6] “Making the Most of Ukraine’s Freedom to Strike Russia.” n.d. Royal United Services Institute. <https://rusi.org/explore-our-research/publications/commentary/making-most-ukraines-freedom-strike-russia>.

[7] ibid

[8] Maj Gen Jagatbir Singh (Rtd) “Why US, Russia are opting for brinkmanship instead of talks to end Ukraine war.” Firstpost, December 3, 2024. <https://www.firstpost.com/opinion/why-us-russia-are-opting-for-brinkmanship-instead-of-talks-to-end-ukraine-war-13841132.html>.

[9] “Making the Most of Ukraine’s Freedom to Strike Russia.” n.d. Royal United Services Institute. <https://rusi.org/explore-our-research/publications/commentary/making-most-ukraines-freedom-strike-russia>.

[10] New Russian doctrine increases possible nuclear weapons use scenarios, The International Campaign to Abolish Nuclear Weapons (ICAN) [https://www.icanw.org/new\\_russian\\_doctrine\\_increases\\_possible\\_nuclear\\_weapons\\_use\\_scenarios](https://www.icanw.org/new_russian_doctrine_increases_possible_nuclear_weapons_use_scenarios)

[11] What is Russia’s nuclear doctrine, newly updated by Vladimir Putin?, Indian Express, 21 November 2024 <https://indianexpress.com/article/explained/explained-global/what-is-russias-nuclear-doctrine-newly-updated-by-vladimir-putin-9680581/>

[12] Guy Faulconbridge and Anton Kolodyazhnyy Putin issues warning to United States with new nuclear doctrine, The Reuters, November 20, 2024 <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/putin-issues-warning-us-with-new-nuclear-doctrine-2024-11-19/>

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[14] ibid

[15] Ibid

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