



THE CLOCKTOWER SERIES

RUSSIA'S EVOLVING REDLINES

STRATEGIC COMPETITION SECURITY SERIES – RUSSIA'S END STATE

YEVGENIYA GABER, ANDRÁS RÁCZ, AND GRAEME P. HERD

The following analysis summarizes the seventh George C. Marshall European Center for Security Studies (GCMC) Strategic Competition Security Series virtual seminar for US fiscal year 2025 (October 2024 to September 2025). On June 30, 2025, under the Chatham House rule, presenters Yevgeniya Gaber and András RácZ, moderated by Graeme Herd, provided insights on Russian leaders' treatment of redlines. This summary reflects the historical realities of the conflict at the time of the seminar.

REDLINES AND RUSSIA

Redlines are generally used by policymakers to distinguish and set limits between acceptable and tolerated actions from those that will not be tolerated. Accordingly, they are designed to have deterrent effects by forcing or at least encouraging opponents to exercise restraint. Redlines directed toward adversaries can be communicated in public or secretly. Redlines, which can be [geographic or target specific](#), suggest retaliatory consequences if escalatory thresholds are crossed. The [purpose](#) of redlines therefore is to deter and so mitigate the risks of unintended outcomes that would

otherwise have dangerous uncontrollable momentum. Russian redlines are designed to shape and influence Western and Ukrainian decisionmakers to [facilitate](#) Russia's war aims, accentuate its strengths, and cloak its weaknesses. In this sense, Russia's use of redlines is part of its [cognitive warfare](#).

To be effective, [redline theory](#) suggests that those proposing a redline have to, in effect, make a choice. Redline setters can be explicit as to what constitutes a breach of the given redline but then should be ambiguous as to the actual

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escalatory consequences, promising, for example, “asymmetrical, rapid, and harsh” responses. Or they can choose to avoid clear, sharp distinctions and thus be ambiguous as to when the threshold might be breached. Simultaneously, they should be explicit and clear as to the retaliatory and escalatory consequences for the adversary. This ambiguity/clarity combination reflects implicit risk trade-offs that those drawing or setting redlines need to be aware of and navigate. On the one hand, a crystal clear, sharply defined explicit escalation threshold creates a [commitment trap](#) for the redline setter. Once an adversary chooses to cross a given redline threshold, the setter loses freedom of maneuver and decision-making autonomy and is then trapped in unwanted escalation. In addition, the adversary may well determine that every action below the clearly stated threshold is permitted, creating what might be referred to as an “acceptance” or “permissibility trap.”

However, if the choice is to exercise ambiguity as to where and when the redline threshold and breach occurs, then this should be accompanied by clarity as to the very clearly promised consequences. The unverifiable nature of breaches may increase the possibility that adversaries stress-test the redline. The redline setter also risks stepping into a “reputational trap.” This point was noted by both Sergei Karaganov and Dmitry Trenin in 2023, who [argued](#) that violations of Russian redlines without a response undercut Russia’s second strike nuclear strategic credibility. Putin’s regime has narrative control in Russia and so hitherto has managed such reputational “costs.” This fact, paradoxically, means that adversaries may feel they can breach Russian redlines with impunity, with the understanding that “Putin can manage.”

REDLINES AND UKRAINE

When considering Russia’s use of redlines in its full-scale, multi-axis attack in February 2022, consistency is the watchword. Russia has been persistently explicit in what would constitute a redline breach regarding Western military lethal aid in support of Ukraine. Russia has also been consistently ambiguous about consequences, promising only “severity,” including nuclear escalation threats and attempted blackmail, at a time and place of Russia’s choosing. In reality, numerous Russian redlines have been violated but these breaches have not led to escalation, including nuclear, by Russia. These violations include:

- NATO supplying lethal aid
- NATO supplying long-range weapons such as the Army tactical missile system (ATACMS) and the high-mobility artillery rocket system (HIMARS)
- Ukraine liberating (e.g., Kherson city) or attempting to retake illegally annexed territory (e.g., Ukraine bombs Russia’s Black Sea Fleet headquarters in Sevastopol)
- Ukraine attacking Russia’s Black Sea Fleet and pushing it out of Crimea
- NATO supplying Ukraine with main battle tanks, such as Leopards, Challengers, and Abrams
- NATO supplying Patriots in 2023
- Ukraine attacking Russian territory and targeting oil refineries, airfields, and arms factories from 2023 onwards, and in 2024, Ukraine’s incursion into Kursk Oblast
- NATO delivering F16s in 2024
- Ukraine using ATACMS in Kursk and the lifting of all restrictions in 2025
- Ukraine executing 2025 Operation Spiderweb, resulting in significant damage to Russia’s nuclear bomber fleet

(Of note, Russian military bloggers and the media responded to the effects of Operation Spiderweb with shock, frustration, and fatalism regarding Russia’s leadership, the lack of escalation, and the hollowness of Russia’s red lines.)

Russia’s redlines are primarily designed to deter the West and can be understood as a form of manipulative reflexive control as a part of Russia’s approach to cognitive warfare. Saber-rattling statements threatening nuclear World War III and insisting on a return to NATO’s 1997 borders are designed to push Russia’s opponents to make self-defeating strategic decisions. Two caveats are worth noting. First, Ukraine’s current and past ability to break through Russia’s redlines does not necessarily mean that Russia will not respond with escalation in the future. Indeed, it is what Russia is doing that should be closely watched, not what Russian officials are saying. Second, the human error element cannot be discounted. Human error compounds Russia’s nuclear threats and could also be a factor in the context of a surprise attack that destroys, for example, the Kerch Strait bridge,

or in an attack triggered by new drone developments. All these factors can change the Russian population's perception and thus its strategic calculus.

Russia's response to NATO's June 2025 The Hague Summit indicates Russia understands 1) NATO member-state pledges to increase defense spending to 5 percent of GDP are long-term propositions; 2) US leadership within NATO matters; and 3) pleasing US President Donald Trump is key. In the final NATO communique, Ukraine was not mentioned, let alone as a NATO member, and Ukraine President Volodymyr Zelenskyy was only invited after a long discussion. Though China was referenced as a "decisive enabler" of Russia, the declaration did not call for a new Russia containment strategy. From a Russian perspective, the text was mild given prior expectations.

However, not only did the United States not announce its withdrawal from NATO—a possibility considered in Moscow—the restrictions placed on weapons Ukraine can purchase are being lifted, not least F16s (with increased funding for pilot training). Additionally, various efforts are moving forward including enhanced intelligence sharing, greater Western investments in Ukraine's defense industry, and a renewed focus on countering Russia's shadow fleet and military transporters. The UK and France continue to signal that discussions are ongoing regarding a post-ceasefire European stabilization

force deployed to Ukraine. Furthermore, Iran's responses to attacks by Israel and the United States are milder than expected, and the US attack on Iran's nuclear facilities itself demonstrated that Trump does, at times, follow through on his administrations' own redlines, an important consideration for Moscow.

CONCLUSIONS

Subsequent to The Hague Summit, on July 4, Trump publicly [expressed](#) disappointment in and frustration with Putin: "We get a lot of bull--- thrown at us by Putin, if you want to know the truth. He's very nice all the time, but it turns out to be meaningless." By July 14, Trump had issued an ultimatum: Russia had 50 days (September 2) to announce a ceasefire or the US would [respond](#) accordingly. This may suggest that the United States and NATO will adopt a tougher policy approach to Russia aimed at changing Putin's strategic calculus by imposing greater costs on Russia. As a result, discussions in and around the NATO Summit may in retrospect be interpreted as catalytic in this regard. In turn, a ceasefire more aligned with Ukraine's preferences regarding sustainability then appears more likely, and Russia's use of negotiations as a means of generating political support to secure Russian military victory becomes less so. ~ Σ

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Dr. Yevgeniya Gaber (yevgeniya.gaber@marshallcenter.org) is professor of national security studies at the George C. Marshall European Center for Security Studies, College of International Security Studies, Regional Security Studies Department. Her research interests include Black Sea security, Ukrainian and Turkish foreign policy, and Russia's irregular warfare. Prior to joining GCMC, Dr. Gaber worked as a foreign policy advisor to the Prime Minister of Ukraine (2021) and served as deputy director of the Diplomatic Academy at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Ukraine (2018–20). She previously served as a diplomat in the Embassy of Ukraine in Ankara.

Dr. Graeme P. Herd (graeme.herd@marshallcenter.org) serves as a faculty member in the Research and Policy Analysis department at the George C. Marshall European Center for Security Studies. His latest books include *Understanding Russia's Strategic Behavior: Imperial Strategic Culture and Putin's Operational Code* (Routledge, 2022) and *Russia's Global Reach: A Security and Statecraft Assessment*, ed. Graeme P. Herd (George C. Marshall European Center for Security Studies, 2021).

Dr. András Rác (andras.racz@gmail.com) is a senior research fellow at the Center for Order and Governance in Eastern Europe, Russia, and Central Asia of the German Council on Foreign Relations (DGAP). From September 2019 to December 2020, he was a senior fellow of the Robert Bosch Center for Central and Eastern Europe, Russia, and Central Asia. Previously, Rác was associate professor at the Pázmány Péter Catholic University in Budapest and nonresident research fellow of the Estonian Foreign Policy Institute in Tallinn. Rác earned his PhD in modern history from Budapest's Eötvös Loránd University in 2008.