

Hypocrisy and “Tactical” Nukes

by William J. Astore*



William J. Astore. (Photo bracingviews.com)

With Russia issuing warnings about using all weapons at its disposal to protect its position in Ukraine, it's a good time to talk about the distinction between “tactical” and “strategic” nuclear weapons.

Put bluntly, there's no real distinction. All nuclear weapons, regardless of size and yield, are devastating and potentially escalatory to a full-scale nuclear war. Were Russia to use “tactical” nuclear weapons, the U.S. and NATO would likely respond in kind. Even if a major nuclear war could be avoided, resulting political disruptions would likely aggravate ongoing economic dislocation, triggering a serious global recession, even a Great Depression, further feeding the growth of fascism and authoritarianism.

When you build weapons, there's a temptation to use them. Weapons don't exist in a vacuum. Within the military, people are trained to use them. Doctrine is developed along with contingency plans. Exercises are run to prepare for deployment and use in wartime, “just in case”. In short, we can't count on sane heads to prevail here, not when some people seem to think you can use a “little” nuke to send a message.

Fortunately for the world, nuclear weapons haven't been used in war since Hiroshima and Nagasaki in 1945. But they are used daily in the sense of intimidating other countries. Currently,

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“Tactical” vs “strategic”?

(Information from the footnote 2 document)

“Tactical warheads” are for use in a limited battlefield, say to destroy a column of tanks or an aircraft carrier battle group if used at sea. The explosive yields of 10 to 100 kilotons of dynamite, are also called “low yield”.

“Strategic warheads” can have an explosive force of 500 to 800 kilotons. They could destroy huge cities and much more.

The reference to “low yield” for tactical weapons is somewhat misleading – as the world discovered in 1945 when the US dropped two atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki in Japan.

These two initial blasts killed about 35,000 and 70,000 people instantly, and tens of thousands more later died from the radiation released.

Those bombs were the equivalent about 15 and 21 kilotons of dynamite, respectively ...

Russia is using its nuclear forces to try to contain US/NATO aid to Ukraine and involvement in the Russia-Ukraine War. Russia is drawing a nuclear red line, and I doubt it's a bluff.

It's hypocritical of both the US and Russia to accuse the other of nuclear brinkmanship since both countries have *contingency plans*¹ to use nukes. Hopefully, it's obvious to both countries how *devastating*² it would be if a nuclear exchange, even a “limited” or “tactical” one, were to occur.

Even as bluffs, nuclear threats are reckless, since there's always some fool who may seek to call the bluff. Let's hope the US/NATO collective doesn't play the fool. We have enough problems in the world without tossing nuclear warheads of whatever size or yield at each other.

Source: <https://bracingviews.com>, 5 October 2022

¹ <https://www.cnn.com/2022/10/03/politics/ukraine-russia-putin-nuclear-weapons-us/index.html>

² <https://www.cnn.com/2022/09/26/europe/russia-ukraine-tactical-nuclear-weapons-explainer-intl-hnk-ml>